Easy in Theory

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Easy in Theory

by the_most_happy

Summary

"When we're older, I'm going to marry 'Samu. I promise. I *swear*."

If someone had told Dazai he would be *fake* dating the sister of one Nakahara Chuuya - his childhood best friend, current housemate and first love - he would have called them crazy. There's just no way.
Alas, that's exactly what he's doing.

Or: Chuuya's unofficial guide on how to stay (almost) sane when your childhood crush is dating your sister.

Russian translations: here and here

Art in notes ❤

Tags updated as of 24/09/23

Notes

Hello! Just wanted to say from the beginning that this fic doesn't involve cheating, because Dazai and Chuuya's sister are not *actually* dating. No surprises, it's all in the summary.
Look out for the tags and other CWs and TWs, though ❤

Beautiful art here, here, here, here and here and here.

Also, I'm mostly on Twitter as @blind_blossom . Come and say hi

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: You're fine, you're fine

Chapter Notes

> Beautiful art of SKK here by the wonderful @criistill1 , here by the lovely and super talented Shimon and here and here from the super talented Nina! ❤

“When we grow up, I’ll marry ‘Samu.”

Six pairs of eyes fix on him.

Now, Nakahara Chuuya — six years of age and not a single shy bone in his body — is fairly sure of his words. He practically shouts them out as soon as he sits at the dinner table, loud enough for the entire party to hear.
He will marry ‘Samu, and that’s final.

“Chuuya, dear…” his father starts, but the boy shakes his head. A mane of messy, fire-red strands slaps his cheeks as he moves.

“No! I'm serious. I’ll marry ‘Samu,” he repeats.

He says it around a big smile that’s missing a tooth.

'I'll marry 'Samu'. He likes the sound of it.
He likes how the declaration brings the entire table to a halt, with his dads gawking at him and Mitsuru forgetting her iPad and Pretty Cure episode to shoot him a puzzled glance. His sister looks at him like he's *dumb*, but nothing new here.
Mori-sensei's grin causes Chuuya to blush, but the amused light in the doctor’s eyes reassures him too.

But most of all, he likes—

“Ew, who wants to marry a chibi?”

Wait.

Cheeks on fire, Chuuya turns to face the other boy. ‘Samu is sitting next to Mitsuru, staring at him in his *stupid* blue t-shirt, with his *stupid* shiny eyes and long, brown bangs bouncing over his forehead.

Ah, that’s right.
Even though he wants to marry him, most days Chuuya doesn’t like

‘Samu.

‘Samu is the best in their class, and all the teachers love him, but Chuuya knows that he is *stupid*.
He’s stupid and stubborn, and he thinks he doesn’t need friends. He also reaches the table like an adult without a pillow already, so he can sit next to Mitsuru and pretend they’re oh-so-grown-up and Chuuya *hates* him for it.
Because ‘Samu is taller than him even though Chuuya is six and ‘Samu is *five*, and that’s not very fair at all.

“*You* said it was fine, and to tell my dads and Micchan and your dad!” Chuuya yells, swinging an accusatory knife in the boy’s direction.

His dad leans in and gently slips the knife out of Chuuya’s tiny fingers, though Chuuya is too focused on the other boy to pay attention.
He should listen and reply to the ‘*careful, love. Paul, please, when you set the table, don’t leave the* knives *where the children can reach them—*’ but Chuuya doesn’t even hear it.
He’s too flustered to mind anything else, because ‘Samu is an *idiot*.

"I never said it!"

"Not true! You said to tell everybody!"

“*Wrong*.” ‘Samu wrinkles his nose, retracting away from the table as if to put *space* between him and Chuuya. “I would never. Marriage is for girls.”

Chuuya scowls.

'Ew’ is not what the boy said ten minutes ago, when he tried to snatch a kiss *(ew!)* out of Chuuya.
Of course, Chuuya pushed him and ran away, because giving a kiss is embarrassing, right? *That* is for girls!
Kissing is not cool, and the boy has some pretty solid evidence for it. Superheroes in movies don’t kiss, for starters, nor do the protagonists of his favorite manga series; so, obviously, neither does Chuuya.

“Liar,” Chuuya says. “You said it was ok."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you *did!* I’m going to marry you because nobody else wants to.”

The other *gasps*.

“W— That’s not true!”

“Yes it is! Fedya says you’re annoying!”

“Chuuya, that is not a nice thing to say to Osamu,” his father says, dark eyebrows almost touching over the root of his nose.

Rando — Chuuya can’t quite *say* his dad’s name yet. He’s trying, though, and dad says he's fine with being called *Rando* for now. Paul and Rando. — sports a frown that causes the child to stop mid-sentence.
Chuuya scowls too, gaze jumping from his dad to Mori-sensei to ‘Samu, lodging in a reply that will explain to his dad *why* he said nothing wrong.

His best friend is annoying; it’s a simple fact.
Everybody at school knows it, and ‘Samu wears the epithet like a golden star. He swears that being annoying is his *superpower*, especially when it makes Fedya cry.

“But..." Chuuya pauses, searching for the right words. "But I’m only saying that *I* will marry him, so he doesn’t have to worry,” he mumbles. “I don’t mind if everybody says ‘Samu is annoying. If I stay with him, he’ll never be alone.”

Never.
That would be too sad, right? They are supposed to be friends forever.

Chuuya can’t quite understand why nobody speaks after.
He lifts his gaze to his dads, and they’re smiling, but there’s something crooked in the way their lips curl, something dull in their eyes. Something *sad*.

“That’s nice of you, Chuuya-kun,” Mori-sensei says. It’s quiet, but it makes Chuuya blush all the same.

Mitsuru rolls her eyes before hiding back behind her iPad — she’s almost nine, she thinks she’s a grown-up now.

“Kids,” she mumbles, before reprising the episode she was watching.

As the first note of cheerful battle music fills the silence, Chuuya sticks his tongue out in her direction.
He doesn’t care if Mitsuru calls him a child, because he’s sure his sister is still a child too, though she acts like she’s so much older than him and 'Samu; he doesn’t care if his dads don’t praise him.

What worries him is that ‘Samu says nothing.
He seems about to cry, eyes glossy and bottom lip trembling, and Chuuya doesn’t understand why.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asks, voice paper-thin, looking at his dads.

"No, baby," Rando replies, immediately. "Right, Paul?"

His dad's blue eyes soften, a gentle light reflecting in azure irises. "Of course not."

"It was very sweet of you."

That prompts a choir of reassurances that don't really *reach* Chuuya. Because, even though Fedya says 'Samu is annoying and Tsujimura calls him a petty know-it-all, Chuuya *likes* to argue with him. He never wanted his friend to cry or shut down, just to know Chuuya will have his back.
No matter what they will grow up to be, he’ll be there.

The boy finds himself even more puzzled when, later, ‘Samu flicks him on the forehead and tells him he’s *grateful* for Chuuya's presence. He still looks on the verge of tears.
And Chuuya might not be sure what grateful means, but it sounds like a good thing.

The next time ‘Samu brings up their promise, it’s at the end of fifth grade.
They’re ten (well, *Chuuya* is ten, but he doesn’t like how he and ‘Samu have different ages for two months, so he shall ignore it) and everything seems bigger. Different. The world appears so much more complicated and brighter, now that they are almost grown-ups.
They feel old enough to decide for themselves — for example, ‘Samu has decided he’s going to wear bandages over his arms from now on. Mori-san allowed it. Chuuya tried to investigate the reason but, every time he asks if his friend is *hurt* somewhere, ‘Samu says he’s too *chibi* to understand.

Normally, Chuuya gets angry when ‘Samu calls him ‘Chibi’ and keeps secrets and hides.

(Though not as angry as the time he pushed the taller boy off the wrong side of the slide and ‘Samu grabbed Chuuya’s wrist, dragging

the redhead down with him, and they both ended up at the ER.)

Anyway, Chuuya is not angry now, holding ‘Samu’s hand as they walk home from school.
A certain satisfaction kindles the boy’s chest whenever he thinks that he and ‘Samu are almost grown-ups and still best friends, and they still walk home together every day. They hold hands to make sure to never lose the other.

Even if they fight sometimes, even if ‘Samu makes fun of him and Chuuya threatens to smack the other boy and ends up scolded… they are still friends. It feels like it will stay forever this way.

“We’ll be in different classes again, next year,” ‘Samu says.

Chuuya *hmm*s.

“Maybe.”

“I don’t care. When I grow up, we’ll be together always because I’ll be the one to marry Chuuya,” he says. When Chuuya lifts his head, caught off guard, Dazai nods. “I *guarantee* it.”

Slowing down, Chuuya purses his lips.

Guarantee? What even is that?

“Gu...?” He stops. “We haven’t learned that word in class yet.”

The brunet smiles, cheeky. “I know.”

Even if he’s a little annoying, Chuuya can’t help but notice that ‘Samu’s face opens up when he smiles. His eyes glitter like the summer sun — and summer is Chuuya’s favorite season, so ‘Samu’s is his favorite smile.

Of course, he refuses to tell so to ‘Samu, or he'll think Chuuya likes summer because of his birthday.
And Chuuya will admit that it’s fun to see how the brunet, always so composed, tries to hide his blush when people sing *‘happy birthday’* to him, but the truth is that *everything* in summer reminds him of ‘Samu. The holidays, the days of freedom playing outside, the capricious drizzles of rain, the warmth and the sun. Everything.

“You’re just showing off!”

“So what? Chibi’s class is so behind~”

“Hey! That’s *super* not true!”

“Then what does ‘guarantee’ mean?” the boy asks, flashing dimples as he grins.

Chuuya gnaws at the inside of his cheek, lowering his gaze to mull over a plausible answer.

“Hm...” He pouts. It’s really not fair because the other class *is* ahead of them, and ‘Samu is even smarter than most of the people at school. Chuuya’s dads say he might be even smarter than some teachers and might get into high school early. “Sensei didn’t explain it yet. I don’t know.”

“It means ‘I promise’.”

“*Oh.*”

‘Samu swings their interlaced hands, and Chuuya knows for a fact that his arm will feel numb after a while, but it’s *nice* to cling to his best friend’s hand.

“I’ll marry Chuuya, one day,” the boy says. It sounds like a knight’s promise as he repeats, louder and unafraid and sincere: “I promise. I *swear*.”

And they both believed it, they did.

They believed they were old and strong and special enough to not grow apart over time.
Chuuya likes to think they have somehow tried to stay true to those words, even though he suspects they didn’t put any effort into fighting the push that tore them apart.

‘One day I’m going to marry you.’

How naïve.

Ever since that promise, life did them dirty.
First, it separated them for thirteen years. Then, it crammed them back together as housemates into a small apartment in Yokohama, and gave them incompatible personalities.
And Chuuya will be damned if he ever marries the shitty walking

hazard that is Dazai *fucking* Osamu.

[Present day]

"So... Ok. It's best if you sit down for this one, Chuuya."

Nakahara Chuuya's day started in a bad way.

First, he woke up ten minutes before his alarm clock. Not enough time to go back to sleep, stealing ten much-needed minutes from his already messed sleep schedule.
Which is annoying enough, right? *Wrong.*
It can always get worse.

After that, Sigma called him for a last-minute job — an advertising campaign in Ginza, and not even a particularly interesting one. Chuuya only accepted because resisting Sigma's puppy voice should be considered a crime, and the other man seemed genuinely mortified as he explained that their client's makeup artist bailed last minute. He'll have to skip class for this one, but the pay is decent and lunch with Sigma is a nice bonus.

So it's eight in the morning, Chuuya hasn't had breakfast yet and he's already late for everything.
Even worse, he'll be even more late — and more pissed off, no doubt — because his stupidly dramatic mummy of a housemate made him *sit down* in their kitchen like he has to confess a crime.

To be fair, Chuuya has been waiting for Dazai to admit a felony.

Based on Mitsuru's words and six months of solid evidence gathered living together, he can confirm that Dazai is an asshole.
Therefore, obviously, Chuuya expected him to admit that he robbed a canned crab factory, fathered a child, or overthrew the mafia by accident. Or maybe all three, not necessarily in this order.

Oh, how wrong he was.

Because Dazai wants to tell him—

"What do you mean, you're going out with Mitsuru?!" Chuuya cries, the words refusing to sink in.

Dazai.

His sister. Chuuya's *sister*. The boy Chuuya punched square in the face once in pre-school, and his older sister. And they are dating. Did Chuuya say it was a bad day? Scratch that.

It's a *terrible* day.

Dazai smiles — a rakish grin that Chuuya would *love* to erase with a punch.
Thirteen years later, the dimples are still there. His smile might be colder, now, melancholic to a level that Chuuya wonders if Dazai's smile was ever genuine at all, but the dimples remain.

"That's why I told you to sit down." The brunet says it as if it was magnanimous of him to sit Chuuya down to tell him he's dating his goddamn sister. Mitsuru and Dazai. Micchan and *'Samu*.
What the fuck, indeed.

"Are you joking?! You're seeing my sister!"

Dazai's grin withers, replaced by a serious expression — tight lips, dark eyes and cheekbones that seem cut in glass.

"Yeah," he murmurs. "I'm sorry for not telling you before."

"You—" Chuuya swallows against his dry throat. "You didn't have to announce it, *Dumb-zai*. You're not special."

Dazai blinks.
Surprise makes him look younger, allowing Chuuya to imagine how Dazai looked as a teen. How odd.

"I thought you'd be shocked."

"No shit?! But you're making a big deal out of it."

"I thought it was a big deal," Dazai says, eyebrows arching in surprise.

"For you, maybe." A pause. Chuuya crosses his arms. "I really don't know what you expect from me."

Not that Chuuya has the right to care.
He's lost the right to judge Dazai a long time ago, when distance killed their relationship, and the shitty mummified Mackerel doesn't have to make it a big deal.
Chuuya has *no* reason to feel betrayed.
They're not friends, not anymore. Dazai moved to another area and

transferred schools before sixth grade, and they lost contact. End of story.

They live together now but, in truth, they are strangers who mildly dislike each other. Just people who shared a few memories for a while and didn't speak for *years* before moving into the same flat out of sheer convenience.

In the meantime, Mitsuru and Dazai went to the same prestigious high school and, later, university.

While Chuuya ping-ponged himself between New York and Paris, caught between fashion marketing courses and catwalks and makeup masterclasses, Mitsuru and Dazai moved to Yokohama.
They have been working in the same environment since Dazai was fought over by PhDs all over Japan at the ripe age of twenty, as the Mackerel *adores* to remind everyone — because he's an annoying bastard like that.

Point is, Dazai was already living in Yokohama when Chuuya returned from his year in Paris and applied for fashion marketing at Bunka. He already had a life.

Six months prior, when confronted with crazy rental prices and a city he didn't know, moving in with Dazai seemed the perfect compromise. They knew the other wasn't a serial killer — though Chuuya could *murder* the boy right now for a reason he can't quite pinpoint — and had similar life schedules. Mitsuru could also stop by and...

Oh.

She has stopped by until late to chat with Dazai, recently, Chuuya notices. Too little, too late.

"How did it happen, anyway?" Chuuya asks, voice low.

He's just making *polite conversation*, yet it sounds a little masochistic to pry into this relationship.

Dazai shrugs, almost dismissive. "It happened."

"These things don't just *happen*, you jackass."

"No, you're right," Dazai backtracks, quietly, running a hand through his hair so damn slow it almost feels like a rehearsed speech. "But it's not even serious, for now. We're just trying it out, but I—" Dazai

hesitates and for a wonderful, *terrible* moment Chuuya feels like Dazai is going to tell him it's all a joke. "I wanted to be the one to tell you before anybody else. To make it easier."

Something ugly roils in Chuuya's stomach, squeezing his guts. He supposes he feels left out.
It's normal since his childhood best friend and his sister are dating, right? *Right*?

"With Mitsuru," he says. "Gosh. *Mitsuru*."

"I know," Dazai murmurs.

"I honestly don't know what to say."

Truth be told, Chuuya expected to scream a lot more. Lash out, maybe. Yet, he has no energy for it; it's eight in the morning, and he's *ready* to crawl back to bed and sleep forever.
Why does he feel detached, like he's watching a movie he's already seen? Why does it feel like he's borrowing someone else's life?

It's not like being with Dazai would have ever been an option, because Dazai is smart and handsome and he likes *girls*.
Chuuya has no time nor serotonin to spare to want a guy who will never love him back. Even if their adult lives had played out differently, Dazai was never going to fall in love with him, anyway.

"We are *adults*, Chuuya," Dazai says. That shuts Chuuya up because it hurts; because it's *true*. "It all happened on Valentine's Day, to answer your question. Mitsuru asked me out, and I said yes, and that's how it started."

"But you are a Mackerel," Chuuya points out, pursing his lips. "Why was Micchan at the fishmonger for Valentine's Day?"

"Chuuya!" Dazai whines, both hands on his chest in a mockery of heartbreak and exploding in a chuckle.

It's so honest, so beautiful a sound, Chuuya almost catches himself laughing — but then, when he drags in a deep breath to chuckle, the air prickles his lungs.
What comes out is a pitiful excuse for a sigh.

(Why?

He doesn't, he *shouldn't* care.)

“I can’t believe it,” Chuuya growls. “What the *hell*. I—”

“Are you angry?”

Chuuya hesitates, lips parted. “What?”

“Are you angry at me?”

The question takes him aback, and the boy finds himself scrambling for an answer. It sounds like the younger Dazai that used to be his friend, like thirteen years of silence didn’t turn them into strangers.

Chuuya thinks over it, frowning.

Is he mad? *Yes*.

Maybe part of him is even worried about his sister.
But what *truly* nags at him is that, while they lost contact, Mitsuru kept seeing Dazai. They shared memories Chuuya was not a part of, building their friendship — their *relationship?* — on the burnt spoils of a friendship Chuuya used to consider written in stone.

“No,” he says, eventually.

He ignores how fake it sounds, and how Dazai squints as if he’s searching for a shard of honesty behind Chuuya's blue eyes and (frankly, poor) display of acceptance.

“You sound angry,” Dazai points out.

His voice rings quietly in the silent kitchen.

Chuuya grimaces.

Does Dazai need his blessing *that* much? Isn’t that cruel? What is he supposed to say when there’s nothing left to discuss?
For a moment, Chuuya would like to scream out with his whole lungs that no, he does not have a say in this entire relationship.
That he won’t allow himself to get mad over something he can’t change. But he doesn't, trying to maintain a diplomatic timbre as he rubs his temples and stifles his *annoyance* where Dazai can't reach it.

“Look, I don't care. It’s ok, really. I’m late, and I have to go.”

“Chuuya—”

“It’s *fine*,” he repeats, voice high-pitched and a little strangled. “I’m pissed, yeah. No shit. But, as you reminded me, you and Micchan are adults.” A short, painful pause. “Just know that if you hurt my sister, I will end you.”

Dazai’s head bobs in a nod. It’s subtle, but it’s there. “I won’t. I promise.”

“No shady shit. I’ll cut your dick and shove it down your throat.”

The brunet's lips twitch up in a shy, controlled smile.
Although the dimples are still there, the old summer-bright beam Chuuya remembers is gone, wiped away by life; this one doesn’t even reach Dazai’s eyes. He *hates* it.

“Chibi’s always the violent type,” he says, and something in Chuuya hiccups.

Always.

When did *always* become outdated?

Chuuya never considered Dazai as someone he hadn’t lost already, before, but this whole predicament proves him wrong. But then... why is he annoyed? Why does it tug at his pride to know that his *sister* is dating his old crush?
It plucks at chords in Chuuya’s heart he didn’t even know existed — raw, painful, hidden strings of his personality, reopening wounds he thought he stitched together a decade before.

And, as old wounds drip flesh blood, he realizes being abandoned doesn’t hurt any less now that he’s older.

He can’t even say Dazai and Mitsuru sneaked behind his back because he wasn’t even in *Japan* as they grew closer.

No, he’s not angry.
Why should he be? Dazai Osamu is nothing but a lost chance, an old friend and a convenient housemate.

He’s terrible.

He’s handsome.

He’s annoying, but Chuuya doesn’t *mind* — that much didn’t change. A smile from him, a quick flash of dimples, and all Chuuya’s defenses

come tumbling down.

He's always surrounded by squealing girls, even though he never truly likes any of them.

And now, as he digests the information that Dazai is *Mitsuru's* boyfriend, one painful mouthful of air at the time, Chuuya wonders why it hurts so much to *breathe*.

—

Twenty-two years.

Dazai never thought he would see his twentieth birthday, let alone turning twenty-three in a month, but life has a way of proving him wrong. And now he's lived twenty-two years collecting mistakes and feeble joys, of losing friendships and earning new ones.

Twenty-two years of living half-alive, inching forward year after year.

Twenty-two years spent sulking from afar for Nakahara Chuuya.

If someone had told Dazai he would be *fake dating* the sister of his (unrequited) first (forever) love, he would have called them crazy.

Alas, that's exactly what he's doing.

It all started because Mitsuru needed Dazai's help to make her ex-boyfriend jealous.

That himbo Fujiwara Teika, bless his heart, is so daunted by his feelings for Nakahara Mitsuru that he tries to escape them at every given chance — and Dazai might not *approve* of him but he loves Mitsuru, and will always help her.
In the many years away from home, she grew to be Dazai's closest friend. She's been there to patch him up when life destroyed him, and his loyalty lies with her. So *yes,* of course, he'd help her.

Mitsuru has been *adamant* about keeping her brother out of it since Chuuya has a tendency to get drunk and blab and accidentally reveal secrets, and Dazai can't even argue that she's wrong.
Even after years, Chuuya developed no ability to conceal his emotions, especially when drunk. He still runs on dangerous honesty and no filter at *all*.
Besides, he sees no reason why his old friend should give a damn about his dating life — or Mitsuru's dating life, for what matters.

Yet—

'Are you angry?'

'Look, Dazai, it's ok. I'm late.'

In a packed train, already late for class, Dazai runs a hand through his hair and replays the scene in his head. Over and over and over again. He's not sure why he's hyper-fixating over that detail, though he blames it on a blend of insecurity, hope and reading too much in between the lines.

Twenty-two years of life.
Thirteen years of silence between himself and the person he used to consider his *forever*.

Twenty-two years, six months living together, and Dazai is still — silently, *desperately* — in love with Chuuya.

Chapter 2: Guide on how to bring back time

Chapter Summary

> Where Dazai needs reassurance, Chuuya builds a pillow fort and teddy bears are waiting in the attic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai regrets letting Chuuya go.

Their friendship never had an actual fallout: adulthood just rolled in and ruined everything.
How tragic is it to realize their predicament is ordinary when their relationship felt everything but.

Some friendships don't end in arguments and explosions and slammed doors.

They just *end.*

They wither away in silence, worn out, buried alive under a hundred unread messages, asphyxiated by days apart, missed calls and postponed encounters.

It's nobody's fault, but it hurts.

Dazai transferred schools, and Chuuya applied for a different institute.
Dazai never knew if (his) Chibi ever defeated his hatred for math, if he'd been accepted into his first choice, if he ended up tutoring a junior or applied to clubs.
He never asked.
He learned through Mitsuru that Chuuya moved to the art academy, then to New York. He'd been on and off in Paris for the last few years, staying in the apartment that used to be of Arthur's parents.

As he started dating, Chuuya also moved on to different boys: cool, athletic and outgoing boys.

Boys that were nothing like Dazai.

Dazai hated every comment he occasionally read on social, he loathed all the captions he saw on Chuuya's couple pictures. *Gosh.*

Chibi really couldn't find himself a boyfriend with *one* brain cell.

It hurt, at first.

Every picture opened a paper cut under his skin, because part of Dazai knew he could have been so much better for Chuuya. But, at the same time, caught between university and work, he didn't have the time to reach out.

Then, Chuuya messaged him on Instagram saying that he was going to move to Yokohama.
He'd seen Dazai was looking for a housemate and Dazai— Dazai said *yes*.

But life has a way of ruining shiny things — oxidizing what's beautiful.
Turning dreams into dust, and children into strangers.

"So, Chuuya's ok with it?"

That's the first thing Mitsuru asks, though she doesn't sound *worried*.

"'Ok with it' seems like an overstatement." Dazai hmms around the rim of his coffee cup. "But he will live."

Around them, half-awake students swarm the university's cafeteria — filling the place with chattering and familiar voices, faces as pale as the white-yellowish walls of the building.
Despite her loud lime-green tailleur that contrasts crudely with the general torpor of the cafeteria and its inhabitants, Nakahara Mitsuru *belongs* to this scenario.
She's a cornerstone, a *conditio sine qua non* of Dazai's everyday life.
She's part of Dazai's universe.

She's been there ever since he entered the PhD as the youngest candidate in the history of his university, she helped him when he was having a mental breakdown over a project.
Despite himself, Dazai watched her bloom from a girl into a woman, from Chuuya's sister into a *friend*.

"Good," she says. A strand of russet hair slips in front of her blue eyes, and she pushes it back nonchalantly. "Thanks for not telling him. He would start yapping, and then he'll get drunk and tell everybody."

“Are you *sure?”*

“Trust me, I know my brother.”

Dazai is about to insist on Chuuya’s behalf when Mitsuru’s attention shifts and her eyes widen as a well-known voice rings in the cafeteria — a male voice, loud and *happy,* greeting some nameless friends.

“He’s here,” Mitsuru whispers, leaning forward and searching for Dazai’s hand. “What’s Tei-kun doing? He’s laughing. Is he looking our way?”

Dazai chuckles under his breath.
In all this time, Mitsuru never changed — so *obsessed* with protein-shakes-and-fun Fujiwara Teika, their university’s golden boy. *Her* Fujiwara.
If labradoodles could personify, Fujiwara would be it: good-natured. Handsome. Painfully, hilariously dumb.

Pretending to swoon, Dazai grimaces. “Ah, how heartbreaking. Mitsuru would go out with me only to make your ex jealous~”

“Idiot,” she says, kicking him on the shin — so strikingly similar to her brother that for a moment Dazai wonders if he’s not friends with her because she reminds him of Chuuya.
He *is* an idiot, though, because he *knew it.*
Mitsuru’s actual words were—

“‘Dazai, my *savior,* pretend to be my boyfriend so I can make Stupid Fujiwara-kun jealous’,” the brunet repeats, dripping satisfaction. “What a shameless woman.”

Mitsuru grins. Her blue eyes glisten — so similar to Chuuya’s, so honest and open.

“Said the king of shameless behavior.”

“At least I don’t have a secret agenda~”

“Uh, sure,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “Didn’t you want to escape your half-baked relationships?”

With a tut, Dazai shrugs the comment away.
She's not wrong, yet Mitsuru doesn’t have to know that all those relationships were initiated for the sole purpose of finding someone with eyes blue enough, with a skin freckled *just so.*

They were rebounds, all of them, and look where rebounds and being in love with Nakahara Chuuya got him.

“Oi,” she calls him, kicking him again. “Focus. What’s Tei-kun doing?”

“Ouch. You’re violent like your brother.” The sound she lets out in response — half a whine and half a lament — is nothing short of desperate, and Dazai rolls his eyes to the ceiling before scanning the crowd for Fujiwara. “I don’t *know* what your himbo is doing. He’s ordering a weird detox thing that tastes like matcha and toxic masculinity, I guess?”

”Don’t be mean.”

”I’m not! You should have thought twice before getting serious with the campus fuckboy.”

“*You* are the campus fuckboy. That’s why I asked *you* to help me.”

“I thought it was for my dashing looks and our year-long friendship,” Dazai retorts, wriggling his eyebrows in that purposefully embarrassing way Chuuya hates.
Unlike her brother, Mitsuru doesn’t mind it much.

“You’re delusional.”

“You love me anyway,” he says.

Delicately, sipping on her coffee, Mitsuru screws up her face and lets the conversation fall into a comfortable silence. She doesn't *correct* him, though, and Dazai's heart sings.
She does love him, and Dazai knows it, yet it’s nice to know she doesn’t love him *that* way.
Yet, there’s something from that morning — guilt, he wonders? — nagging at him every time he remembers Chuuya’s eyes, his quiet acceptation.
How he asked follow-up questions as if it wasn’t his business.

“Ne, Mitsuru,” he calls, softly. “Can I ask you something?”

The girl’s eyes widen, curiosity painted in their deep blue. Dazai never asks if he can do something, he just *does* it. “Sure?”

“I talked to Chuuya this morning.”

And I wish I didn’t, because there was something wrong.

“Yes.” She nods. “You told me.”

“And, he— No, *I* was wondering… when did Chuuya stop calling me by first name?”

Mitsuru’s eyebrows arches. “Why?”

“Just curious.”

He says it like the doubt isn’t suddenly torturing him.

“Oh, wow. Beginning of middle school, I guess?” She hums, gnawing at her bottom lip as if mentally skimming through the memories whilst petting her cappuccino. “Right after he put ‘Samu in the attic.”

“After *what?!”* Dazai cries, jaw on the floor and loud enough for a few people to turn.

Was the Chibi hexing him? Is this a horror story? Was he locking a voodoo doll in an attic?
Is he going to *die?!*

Mitsuru shrugs. “Ah. Sorry. Did I ever mention it?”

“No?”

“Don’t go thinking you’re *special*, now. Chuuya had that habit of naming toys after people.” She giggles, her shoulders trembling oh so delicately at the memory. “He called a pig toy Paul, you can imagine how that went down: dad turned it into a tragedy.”

“Chibi never told me,” he murmurs, a somber note dancing at the edge of his voice.
Should he feel betrayed that he never knew Chuuya called his toys after people, and specifically that he offended his dad? No. Is he feeling betrayed anyway? Absolutely.
It’s the umpteenth reminder that he doesn’t know Chuuya anymore.

“Do you think my brother would have admitted to *you* he had plush toys? ‘Samu was his teddy bear.”

Dazai almost chokes on his coffee. “A teddy bear!?”

Chuuya called it ‘Samu.
Chuuya called something that brought him comfort after *him* as if Dazai deserved it, and then put it in the *attic*.

But Mitsuru is grinning as if she used to tease Chuuya about it, and a shiver darts down Dazai's spine.

"He will deny it, but it was his favorite toy. It had a bolo tie and a honey jar and—"

"And I've always liked sweets," Dazai says, a little strangled. God, this is making him feel worse. "You never told me."

"You never asked," Mitsuru says, tilting her head in confusion. "Too bad you were a little smartass, so my brother's toys were kind of secret. But anyway, yes, I think it ended around middle school."

As his lips stretch, Dazai is not sure if he's smiling or having a mental breakdown. Maybe both.
It surely *feels* like both.

"So poor 'Samu is in the attic," he says.

"Well, yeah. Everybody thought it was to get over the fact that you guys weren't really friends anymore, y'know?"

Mitsuru takes a sip of her coffee and crosses her legs. It must be because she heard Fujiwara strutting their way, Dazai supposes. Fujiwara is around spreading musky cologne and testosterone and, no matter what, Mitsuru's eyes are always on him; they always find each other, those two.
But how can Dazai care about that, and about his little fake dating situation, when his lungs are on fire?

"I see. So Chibi stopped in middle school."

Yet he is still calling him Chibi: *his* Chibi when Chuuya was never his. Chuuya never needed Dazai to chase away his nightmares.
A teddy bear has done a better job than him.

Mitsuru shrugs. "Don't quote me on it, but I suppose that calling a semi-stranger by name was awkward."

"I—" Dazai stops, taking a shuddering breath. Breathing shouldn't be this difficult, but it is. "I guess Paul and Arthur must be happy to have an attic filled with your dolls and Chibi's old toys."

He thought Mitsuru would laugh at that, and that she'd tell him how Paul hates it. Then he could comment something on how Mori threw all his stuff away when he moved out.

But she *doesn't,* blue eyes widening as if — once again — he got it all wrong.

"Oh, not at all."

"...No?"

Mitsuru smiles. "Dads donated most of our toys to charity shops. Only 'Samu stayed."

—

It all starts when Chuuya steps home after a long day on set.
His lipstick is smeared and a headache is throbbing in the back of his head, but his heart stutters as he takes in the scene at home.

A faint smell of beer and smoke hits his nostrils first.

Over the last six months, Chuuya has learned that Dazai only smokes when he's stressed.
Today, it seems, the tide washed in a restless, over-stressed *Mackerel:* one who is sprawled on the couch, with his head sandwiched between two pillows.
It would have been a funny sight to witness if it weren't for the obvious *tightness* of the boy's shoulders, the nervous twitches of his hands.

Chuuya can *sense* that Dazai's entire back must be a tapestry of nerves and knots of tension, plain discomfort oozing from the brunet.

"Dazai? Are you—" Panic warms his voice. "Are you alright?"

"Chibiii~"

"What's wrong?"

Dazai answers with a string of muffled laments, rolling on the couch.

"What's *right?"*

Chuuya's eyebrows dart up.
Osamu, you're worrying and annoying the fuck out of me.

It soars from Chuuya's lungs, old name and all, but it also stays trapped in his throat. The redhead takes a deep breath and stifles it down as he pulls into the room.

“Oi!” He barks. “Stop it. Are you dumb?”

“Let me die alone.”

“HA?”

With a sigh, Chuuya sits on the couch. Well, in a *corner* of the couch next to Dazai’s head, because God forbid the asshole scoots over to leave him space.
He grabs the pillow that covers Dazai’s head and tosses it on the floor, earning back a soft, dramatic whine that he ignores.

“Come on.”

Dazai sighs into the pillow, downright *childish*. “Come on *what?”*

“Shoot. What’s wrong?”

“It’s been a terrible day.”

From a trembling edge in Dazai’s voice — subtle, but not enough for Chuuya to miss it — the redhead realizes that Dazai is not being dramatic at all: it *has* been a difficult day.
Gently, he brushes Dazai’s shoulder.

“And you can talk about it, y’know.”

“You’d think it’s stupid.”

“Try me.”

“Leave me alone, Chibi,” Dazai says, turning his face to face him.
His cheeks are puffy (puffy and cute, a treacherous voice provides in the back of Chuuya's mind) but his eyes shine under the lights, glossy.

Chuuya can't quite decide if he's drunk and tired or if he's been crying.

“No.”

“I said it’s not worth it,” Dazai mumbles. Sheepish.

“Bullshit.”

“Chibi’s such a nosy th— *ah.”* The brunet stops mid-sentence, his attention captured by something. “You’ve got lipstick on your…” Dazai’s voice trails off again, his words replaced by an arm raised and an absent thumb that reaches for Chuuya’s chin. Too, too *close* to his bottom lip, and Chuuya sucks in a deep breath but doesn’t dare *moving. “…Face.”*

It’s a light, distracted touch, just like distracted and vaguely intoxicated is Dazai’s gaze.
An inviting, but *wrong* touch, that makes Chuuya shudder.
The air is suddenly sucked out of his lungs, and he’s *tempted* and broken and lost, falling apart under Dazai's searing gaze.

How can such a gentle touch break him so? Does he miss his old friend so much?

(Or is it because Mitsuru has *stolen* Dazai?

Because Chuuya is angry, and he is not ok; nothing is *ok.*)

“Yeah,” he breathes out. “I had to swatch the shade on myself earlier on a shooting, and— it got smeared.”

Dazai’s thumb skims over his chin — featherlight, but scorching hot. His eyes roam across his face, and Chuuya almost hopes against hope that Dazai is affected by the same numbing feeling that grips him.

“It looks good on you,” Dazai murmurs.

Chuuya’s heart beats in his throat. “It’s ruined. The texture of this lipstick is shitty.”

“It still looks good.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

It’s just a red stain. A shitty red for a shitty, overpriced lipstick. Why does it burn, now?

“I’m serious.”

“…”

“I mean it, Chuuya.”

As Dazai says it, voice so *husky* and gaze far away, a hundred images flash in front of Chuuya's eyes.
Treacherous, wrong images of *Dazai* smearing the lipstick for him with his hands, with his mouth.
Images of Dazai's thumb grazing his lips, warm and careful, just before the pad of his finger gets substituted by his lips. For a moment, Chuuya wonders if this fluttering touch could become sinful and lustful and *his.*

Could Dazai's mouth kiss the heartache away?

However, against his better judgment and against all his instincts, Chuuya turns his head to escape the touch.

Dazai is *Mitsuru's* boyfriend; he's stressed and tired and he always liked teasing.

This need and unnamed pull — the feelings rippling through Chuuya's body, like light seeping into a stale room, every time Dazai touches him — are nothing.

"What's wrong, Dazai?" Chuuya asks again. Gentle, *so* gentle.

"I got some corrections," the brunet finally admits, voice dull. His eyes stray away from Chuuya's lips, and he doesn't know if it's a blessing or a curse. "On a paper at uni. It was an important one and I— *I* don't get *corrections.* I'm a genius. I don't fail." For a moment, Chuuya considers suffocating him with a pillow, but then Dazai talks again: "…Am I dumb, Chibi?"

Shit, Chuuya thinks to himself. *He can't be serious.*

But it also breaks Chuuya's heart, because insecurity melted away all of Dazai's masks.
They slipped away, revealing the self-doubting young man under the cocky genius.

"Dazai, it's a paper," he whispers. "It's not personal."

"It *felt* personal," Dazai says, sneaking closer into Chuuya's space for comfort. "It feels like Odasaku was wrong at offering me the position, and—" He shivers. "I'm a fraud."

Chuuya frowns, scrambling for words that never feel meaningful enough.

Dazai is insecure.
He's insecure to the core, under that apparent smugness, and Chuuya can recognize imposter syndrome when it punches him in the face. And— ok, Chuuya gets it.
It's not *easy* to accept feedback in a field you're good at.
Especially if you're Dazai-*genius*-Osamu and everybody thinks you'll get a Nobel prize before turning thirty.
Especially when you are Dazai Osamu and, *no*, you don't get corrections *ever*. When you are Dazai-kun and adults have been dumping expectations on you all your life.

Chuuya has been by Dazai's side for only a bunch of years at the very beginning of their lives, but he remembers the way teachers treated him — as if his unruly, borderline unpleasant character could only be endured at the price of a continuous, inhuman academic success.
He couldn't get sick, he couldn't aim for an A-.

He couldn't fall short on a mock text without general disappointment.

But Chuuya sees it — he's seen it all along: he sees *Dazai* beyond the prodigy.
He sees how much the pressure damages Dazai; just a boy with many insecurities simmering under the surface.

That's why Chuuya's hand searches and finds the brunet, this time, sinking soothing fingers in his hair. Soft curls meet a tentative touch. Dazai thaws when the pads of Chuuya's fingers find the boy's scalp, massaging it with slow, circular movements.
He can feel Dazai's heartbeat, the stress, the *expectations* that crush him day by day.

Chuuya just wants to melt some of the stress away.
It's selfish, perhaps, that he wants to *touch* Dazai. He wants the brunet to relax and believe in himself while Chuuya massages his pain away, turning his worries into silence.
He wants to comfort his friend.

"How is it?"

"Nice," Dazai purrs, half-whispering.

"You're not a fraud, Dazai, and you're not less smart because a shithead added a few shitty doodles on a paper." Dazai inhales sharply but doesn't reply. He's so *real* under Chuuya's fingers — so easily broken. "Your crafty ass is certainly not dumb."

"..."

"You're not less than anybody else."

"What if I made it this far because of luck."

Chuuya's fingers twitch, stopping for a moment before gently moving again.

"Dazai," he says, voice as soothing as his touch. "You're many things, and many of them annoy the shit out of me, but you're certainly not where you are because you've been lucky." His fingers rub Dazai's skin, sinking into his soft curls. "You're a pain in the ass. And you're a terrible housemate because you're *so* messy, you're nosy and a flirt and a brat, and—" *You're a good friend.* "—You're the smartest person I know."

He's also the person he wants closer, Chuuya finds himself thinking, but that would be selfish and mean.
For the longest moment, Dazai stays silent.
Patiently, Chuuya allows him time to internalize his words — because he knows the brunet will wrestle the reassurance before he believes it. Dazai was never good at accepting help and allowing others to talk some sense into him, but Chuuya will try anyway.

After a moment of hesitation, Dazai melts into a weak sigh. "Does Chuuya really think so?"

"Yeah."

"I—" He squirms under the redhead's touch, tilting his head to better angle Chuuya's touch — to make it *deeper.* "I'm quite positive you're wrong, though."

And that's enough.
It takes a lot of effort for Chuuya to keep in the 'enough's enough,' he wants to holler.
Now, he can *stand* flirty Dazai who wastes thirty minutes of their afternoon trying to woo a random lady at the supermarket (gross) while Chuuya is trying to pick between two yellow peppers.
He can deal with annoying Dazai who thinks himself oh-so-smart.
What he *can't* stand is imposter-syndrome Dazai.

Because Dazai is cocky, smug and a jerk.
Dazai is also quick-witted, and brilliant and handsome (and hot) and he worked *hard;* it might not look like it, but he always worked harder

than anybody else. Chuuya may not have been there to witness it all, but he knows it.

“Ok,” he says, retreating his hand — and ignoring how Dazai *whines.* “That’s enough.”

“...Enough?” Dazai echoes, a little taken aback, voice small.

“What’s your favorite snack?”

(Why is he asking that? Dazai’s favorite snack used to be a terribly sweet kakigōri. It must still be—)

Dazai blinks. “Saké?”

(Yeah, no, forget that.)

“Oh my god, you’re a jerk,” Chuuya groans, ears pinking when Dazai’s genuine chuckle brushes his senses like silk. “Well, mine is popcorn. So we’ll get a bowl, some saké and beer, and we’ll watch your favorite movie. How does that sound?”

Dazai hesitates.

“Actually...” the boy murmurs, propping himself up and tucking a strand behind his ear. For a moment Chuuya is positive Dazai will find a way to excuse himself out of operation Save-The-MackerelTM. Much to his surprise, he doesn't; he smiles. *“Actually,* can we get some fruit sandwiches, too?”

And fruit sandwiches they got.
That, and a blanket and plenty of pillows.

Chuuya knows for a fact that the best cure for a bad grade is a pillow fort, lots of snacks and the comfort of annoying, infuriating, *loving* friends.
And he might not be as good a Doc at piling up pillows, he can’t give Pianoman’s TED Talks or make ‘Tross’ banger drinks, but he can make a decent fort and stick Dazai in it until he feels better.

They didn’t end up picking Dazai’s favorite movie, though. Instead, the brunet proposed the last one they had watched together as kids — Chuuya stuttered, taken aback by the fact that Dazai *remembers,* but couldn’t decline.
‘In honor of the good ol’ times,’ Dazai said and, for once, it’s sweeter than it is bitter.

How could Chuuya refuse?

For now, he's content being snuggled under the same blanket as Dazai, pillows stacked between them, with way more snacks than they can eat and The Sleeping Beauty playing in the background.
Chuuya has changed into a sweatshirt and messily collected his hair in a bun with a ratty velvet scrunchie, while Dazai is buried deep into the blanket. The redhead is turning to grab a handful of popcorn when he hears Dazai chime in.

"Chibi?"

"Yes?"

"What's that? Is that a cat?" Dazai says, pointing at the spot behind Chuuya's ear. "The tattoo, I mean."

Before he can stop himself, Chuuya smiles and reaches for his ear — lips curling up, cheeks radiating a comfortable heat. It's such a hidden spot, it doesn't surprise him that Dazai never noticed the tattoo since they have never been this close, and he rarely ties his hair.

So, no, it doesn't surprise Chuuya that Dazai never noticed the tiny, subtle drawing — a cat curled on itself, a little planet.
It's elegant if he might say so himself, but most of all it sparks in Chuuya the most chest-warming, bone-deep comfort. He misses home — and he feels *closer* to it as his hand finds the tattoo.

"Arahabaki," he says.

Dazai lets out a small *ah* of understanding. "The cat?"

"My cat," Chuuya specifies, fingers brushing the spot ever so tenderly. He fought to adopt him, and now his dads are under strict instructions to send him at least ten pictures a day.

Dazai *hmpf*s, uncharacteristically mellow. "Yeah. Mitsuru shares only three hundred pictures of him in the study group chat every day."

Chuuya ignores the pang in his stomach. Mitsuru.
Of course they have to talk about Mitsuru, of *course* it's her sending Dazai pictures of *his* cat.

"As she should," he still says.

“It’s nice.”

“Thanks,” he says. The heat spreading across his cheeks intensifies as he feels Dazai’s bruising gaze on him. “I designed this, y'know? And I'm pretty proud of it. I was in New York and I missed home, and..." And he is the kind of person who wants to tattoo his loved ones on his skin. Dazai included — like a best friend, *obviously*.

(*No, you dumb fuck*, his brain provides. *It took you one minute to decide to be ‘Samu’s friend, and six months to admit you fell in love with Dazai.*)

And now it’s too late.
What a loser, huh?
It took him way too long to realize something so stupid.

Maybe going to see his parents and his cat, away from Mitsuru and *her* boyfriend, will help him. He can also stop by the attic to see if Samu is alright, like he always does: he'd say hello, hug the teddy bear and feel at *home* again.
Yes, Chuuya thinks, he should go home.
Or, at least, he should convince his dads to let him take their (very much worshipped) house cat to Yokohama with him.
It’s either Arahabaki’s way or the highway, in the Nakahara household.

“And you...?” Dazai prompts him, quietly, leaning in to poke Chuuya’s cheek.

With a *tch* sound, Chuuya slaps Dazai’s hand away. “So I got the tattoo, and people like *you* remind me every day why cats are better than humans.”

“Ah, but Chuuya is a shrimp.”

“Then you are a rotten fish,” Chuuya says with a scoff, scooting away from Dazai's reach. “Now shut up and let me watch the movie, yeah?”

Dazai groans, rolling into the pillows stacked between them and pressing the fabric against Chuuya’s side.
Just some *stupid* fabric separates them and Dazai is way too close for Chuuya's comfort, but luckily he seems more interested in slandering an old animated movie than noticing how the redhead’s neck turned pink.

“But it’s so *du-uuu-mb.”*

“Dazai.” Chuuya sighs, a little exasperated. “It’s a Disney movie. Of course, it’s childish.”

“And that dress is ugly in both colors.”

“Yeah, not going to say you’re wrong about that.”

“And, look." The brunet gestures vaguely at the screen, where the protagonist is about to fall for the villain's plot. Chuuya only remembers it because, many years before, Dazai’s little cousin (little Elise, not-so-little-anymore since she’s in high school) insisted on watching The Sleeping Beauty on repeat every single day. “It’s obviously a trap.”

Chuuya stuffs some popcorn in his mouth, buying time to decide if he wants to reply or strangle Dazai.

“I guess there must be a reason why it’s called The *Sleeping* Beauty and not the ‘Beauty smart enough to avoid an obvious trap’.”

“True.” Pensively, Dazai gnaws at his bottom lip. “Just look at that background and the colors of the scene. It's *obvious.* Did Chibi know that green and lime shades often pointed to a villain?”

“Oh?”

Dazai shrugs as he explains, voice flat: “This movie is from the ‘59. Although based on a fairytale of the end of the 1600, it still follows the modern psychology of color. So predictable.”

And he dares to call himself dumb, Chuuya thinks, scowling.
Dazai is book-smart, curious, and well-read. He’ll text in Morse code for fun. He knows about lucid dreams, taxidermy (he follows the YouTube channel of a weird guy called Lovecraft), botany (yet would kill a succulent within the first twenty-four hours), and — apparently — Disney movies.
He’s a treasure of discovered-on-the-Internet-at-3-am-battling-anxiety trivia, yet the smallest failure makes him think he’s not enough.

“That’s interesting,” Chuuya lies.

“Colors like black and green were used for villains,” he says. “If I were a character, I’d be dressed in black.”

“You’d be in yellow to hurt everybody’s synapses.”

“Never!”

“Or you’d wear something tasteless, like a tan coat or something.”

“Why, because I’m tall and *I* can actually pull off a trench coat, unlike Chuuya?”

Chuuya rolls his eyes, vaguely *exasperated.* “No, because you have zero fashion sense. But, yeah, how dare the character not browse random Wikipedia pages.”

“You learn a lot when you can’t sleep,” Dazai says like it’s *normal.* “Another reason why this protagonist is dumb. She slept too much.”

“You’re seriously putting too much thought into it.”

“I’m just saying it’s stupid.”

“And you are childish,” Chuuya volleys back. Dazai’s eyes widen, playfully offended.

“Am not?!”

“Are too. Now shut the fuck up.”

Over the years, Chuuya grew to believe that his mind was made to bicker with Dazai. The habit is so deeply rooted in Chuuya, it might as well be a personality trait.
Despite everything that happened, it’s still part of him.
Just as it’s part of *them* how Dazai scoffs and throws a panda-shaped biscuit at Chuuya, aiming for the forehead.

To piss off Dazai, the redhead catches it with his mouth — praying it doesn’t end up in his eye or chokes him, munching cautiously on the treat (he hates strawberry flavored Hello Panda) once it lands on his tongue.

“Aaaah,” Dazai squeals, clapping. “Bravo! Chuuya is such a well-trained seal, I should bring him to an aquarium to perform!”

“What?!”

“How shall we call you? Chibikko, the Dumb Trick-performing Seal~”

“I’m not a seal, you ass!”

“Right. Seals are cute. A dog, then~”

“HA!?”

The free, genuine chuckle that spills from Dazai’s mouth curls Chuuya’s lips into a tight-lipped smile, too.
See, this is the deal: Chuuya doesn’t *care* if The Sleeping Beauty offends Dazai’s intelligence and if they banter, as long as the situation shuts up the Mackerel’s overthinking brain. Because it’s nice to hear the boy giggle like this when he was doubting himself so very deeply only a moment before.

“You know, Chibi, you accuse *me* of being childish, but Odasaku can’t tell Cinderella apart from The Sleeping Beauty.”

Odasaku.

That name again.
The comment dropped so casually attracts Chuuya’s interest back to Dazai: it's not strange to catch unknown names falling from Dazai’s lips, but this one is different. It’s often wrapped in a lighter note, a lilt that says ‘this one. *This* one is important.’
And Chuuya wants to know all about Dazai’s important people, if it's not too late now.

“By the way, who is this Odasaku?” he asks.

Dazai beams — for once, it reaches his eyes.
It makes them shine, it brings out the sun, and Chuuya realizes he hasn’t seen this smile in a minute. It’s weird how Dazai’s truest smile — so rare — can still bring out the summer.

“Finally! I thought Chuuya would never ask!”

“Ha? You’ve been naming this guy randomly without context on purpose?”

“I wanted you to be curious!”

*What? Just **who** is this guy?*

“Then just tell me?!”

“Odasaku is my best friend, of course!” Dazai chirps, enthusiastically, leaning closer into Chuuya’s space. “He’s also the one who wrote my recommendation letter for the PhD, and vouched for me.” His smile widens. “Odasaku believed in me.”

He says it, but it sounds like ‘he acknowledged me’; the *real* me.
It steals a bittersweet grin out of Chuuya — a smile that nicks at his heart and cuts his face.

He’s not hurt Dazai has another best friend, of course, as long as the brunet can accommodate some space for Chuuya too in his life.
What hurts Chuuya is the underlying *loneliness,* because no one should ever say that one person saw something in them when nobody else did.

Chuuya always had so many friends around, but Dazai? He speaks ad if Odasaku was the only meaningful one.

He never wanted to be Dazai’s only friend, Chuuya, and he's far from jealous of other people: with the Flags, he learned people can *care* about multiple friends at the same time.

Sure, it stings a little that he allowed himself to drift so far away from Dazai’s friendship and presence, but he’s getting to know the boy now.
He was lucky enough to get another chance: even if it’s not the chance he would want, it’s still something to treasure.

“Ah. He sounds nice,” Chuuya says, not untruly.

“He’s the best person in the world.”

There’s an obvious *fondness* in Dazai’s voice — and, this time, it warms Chuuya’s chest.

“Ah. That’s great,” Chuuya says.

“…”

Dazai pouts, eyebrows almost touching at the top of his nose and cheeks slightly puffy with air. It’s childish, and it reminds Chuuya of a younger Dazai. It makes him frown, too.

“What?”

“I just think Chuuya would like him very much.”

Ah, Chuuya realizes, *The infamous defensive Mackerel.*

“I’m *sure."* He grins. “See that you organize a night out or something, shitty Dazai. We can all go drinking.”

“Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

Chuuya can’t but get jittery as he drowns in Dazai’s gaze — covered in an uncharacteristic veil of unguarded, shiny happiness. He swallows around a wad of cotton, tongue heavy in his mouth.

“Of course not,” Chuuya says. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Really?”

“He makes your shitty ass happy; you’re tolerable when you’re happy, so I gotta thank him for his services.”

He never wanted Dazai for himself specifically, he just never wanted him to be alone — or being judged by idiots like Fedya.

(Chuuya shall also ignore that he made out with Fedya when he met him in New York, because it was two years ago during a fashion week and it meant nothing.

Well, ok, it was nice. *Very nice.* But it was random: Fyodor had started talking about how he checked Dazai on LinkedIn from time to time, and something in Chuuya’s I-drank-too-many-Pinot-glasses body went rogue. He needed Fedya to *shut up,* but he also felt lonely. Desperately drunk, and desperately lonely.
It’s not like he’s keeping in touch with Fedya or anything.)

If Odasaku and Mitsuru make Dazai happy, then Chuuya will be happy for him. It’s enough to know that Dazai is *content*.

“...Chuuya?”

Dazai’s voice makes him wince — *heavy* like velvet, husky. Honest.
“Hm?”

“Thank you.”

He blinks. “For what?”

“For being here.” Dazai shoots him a subtle, somber smile. “I’ve missed being Chibi’s friend.”

Chuuya smirks back.
That stung, but he missed Dazai too.

“Huh... I’ll grab some beers from the fridge,” he grumbles because he has *no* idea how to reply.

How do you reply to someone who is looking at you like you saved them today? How do you reply to the person you've liked for the last week — no, that you've liked for the last six *months* — and that is also your sister's boyfriend?
But beer doesn't help Chuuya's predicament.
If anything, it makes it worse.

Because bringing in beers means that Chuuya drank more than he should have, and he's not really *sure* how it happened but it's well past one in the morning, they're ending their third Disney movie in a row and they're both drunk.

Chuuya discarded the pillows between them, cursing how Dazai keeps all the beers for himself and throws Hello Panda biscuits calling for an encore of 'Chibikko the Seal'. Dazai knocked over the bowl with the popcorn.
They may have disturbed the entire neighborhood. It's *chaos.*
They have been bingeing movies Chuuya doesn't even *remember,* singing Disney songs so loud that the neighbor banged on the wall that separates their houses in the best part of 'How Far I'll Go'.

It was totally Dazai's fault, by the way: the *idiot* was the one who stood up to sing, waving a beer bottle. He only stumbled down when Chuuya grabbed his trousers and tugged violently, barking at him to sit down.

('Oi, shitty vagabond, you're blocking the view!'
'Chuuya?!' An intoxicated gasp. 'I *am* the view!')

At some point, Chuuya microwaved some teriyaki chicken, though he doesn't *remember* doing it, and forced Dazai to eat while the jerk poked his cheek and called him a mama bear.
They even attempted three quick Mario Kart games — which Chuuya lost in record time, so he called it a day and retreated back to Disney movies: at least he can't lose at watching a movie, can he?

They will probably regret everything in the morning but, at least, Dazai is happy. At least, his eyes aren't glossy with tears anymore.

"Chuuya smells nice. Like home and teriyaki sauce."

Half-heartedly, Chuuya slaps away Dazai's fingers — wandering, gentle fingers currently tugging at his hair and plucking away popcorn bits.

“I’m sure you can come up with something better than teriyaki, you jackass.”

“Honey,” Dazai says, eyes lambent. It's a whisper, yet it *rumbles*. “Chuuya smells like honey,” Dazai says again, hands in Chuuya’s auburn strands, the scrunchie that tied them up lost, plucking popcorns away from his hair.

Chuuya guesses some people pluck daisy petals or paper stars from each other’s hair, they have popcorn bits the clumsy mackerel threw everywhere.

“So I don’t smell like teriyaki.”

“A little,” Dazai murmurs, “and I like it. But we’ll ignore it if you don’t like it.”

Chuuya groans.
His cheeks are flushed because of the alcohol, and a mellow sense of tiredness washes over him with every passing minute.
He’s been *falling* into Dazai’s space, curling into each other’s bubble as the alcohol and tiredness kick in. He wants to ask if Dazai still likes honey, but he doesn’t dare.

“I can live with honey,” Chuuya hums instead, slurring his words. “Not with teriyaki.”

“Nothing’s better than teriyaki.”

“Please don’t ever *say* that to Mitsuru,” Chuuya says, shivering as Dazai seems to be *playing* with his hair rather than anything else. It’s a little masochistic, he supposes, but Dazai chuckles. His breath fans over Chuuya’s skin, warm, as the brunet’s fingers work gently the popcorn bits out of his hair.

“Why would I say that to Mitsuru?”

Because *she* is your girlfriend. “You just don’t want to tell her she smells like teriyaki, trust me.”

“I said something similar to a girl, once,” Dazai says. “She left.”

“Well, no shit.”

“She called me a bastard and ran away.”

“Really not surprised here," Chuuya says.

“But she was boring. I was going to stop seeing her, anyway. Mission accomplished~!”

“It’s not something you should be proud of?!”

As he says that, Chuuya turns to face Dazai, his movements slowed down by the drunkenness and vision blurred, and he halts.

Oh.

Their faces are close.
Too close, because Chuuya’s brain glitches and, for a moment, he wants to yeet himself from the room; he wants to do that *or* lean in and close their distance. God, he really wants to lean in but he can’t: he can’t do this to his sister.
Instead, he scowls and reluctantly pushes away.

“Damn it, you’re such a menace.”

“I don’t know why I’m still trying to reason with you.”

Dazai’s beam is genuine, another summer smile. “Because I’m the best?”

Chuuya’s heart stutters as he remembers Dazai calling himself a fraud barely hours before.
For how long has Dazai hidden his insecurities under a cheap pretense of cockiness, he wonders?
Chuuya clicks his tongue and doesn’t reply, finding it impossible to answer without either undermining his confidence or launching himself on a TED Talk on how Dazai *is* the best at many things.
Maybe the Mackerel is not the best at being lovable, but he’s genuine and he *is* worthy of love.

“Ne, Chuuya—”

Dazai stops, voice dying. Chuuya stares and he opens his mouth to nudge him, then closes it, then swallows.

His Adam’s apple bobs down, and every mouthful feels like swallowing sand and needles but Chuuya forces the air down nonetheless — re-teaching himself how to breathe as he waits. The way Dazai is looking at him steals another heartbeat out of the redhead.

A precious, little heartbeat that will be Dazai's forever, now.

A piece of Chuuya's heart that the boy will never claim back because Dazai can *have* all his heartbeats and all his sighs.
He can have Chuuya's every breath, every pump of blood — even though his heart is a little clumsy and trips over itself every time Dazai smiles.
He can have all Chuuya's nights drunk, all his mornings hangover, all his afternoons and rainy days and lazy weekends.
He can have all of Chuuya's mornings, all his restless nights.

All his kisses and heartaches. All his tomorrow, all his forever.

Dazai Osamu holds his heart.

And it's almost cathartic to realize that Chuuya has been carrying this weight all along, all alone, and that he's been in love with Dazai for a while now. Maybe it's way too late; maybe he crosses the finish line when there was nobody left waiting for him.
Maybe in another life, he would have been on time.
Surely now he can't say anything, but... it's good to be able to recognize it.

Dazai seems on the verge of talking, lips shaped in a soft 'o', then decides against it. Instead, he flops down on the pillows and drags Chuuya with him.

Blue eyes widen as Chuuya realizes that he's resting his head on Dazai's chest — feeling bones and soft gauze under his ear, a gentle arm wrapped around his middle. Hearing *Dazai's heartbeat* in his brain.
It's so unfairly easy, how his own heart adjusts to Dazai's pace.

"Chuuya?" the brunet calls again as if to test the name on his tongue.

The redhead wonders what emboldened him: if the proximity or the lack of visual contact. Maybe both.
Maybe it's the soothing rhythm of their chests heaving in synch, the credits of the umpteenth movie they didn't follow rolling in. The redhead lets out a soft *hmm*-ing sound, adjusting his head under Dazai's chin.
Breathing him in.

"Yes?"

"We should turn off the TV."

“Hm.”

“We should put the beers in the fridge.”

“Hm.”

“Do you think we can sleep here?”

Chuuya finally groans in response, a voice telling him they definitely should *not.*
They’ll wake up with a terrible backache, and they should drink some water, and they should crawl to their (separate) beds.

They are sharing a pillow fort and sleeping on the same surface and breathing the same air and it feels dangerous.

But—

But Dazai is also his friend, damn it, it’s not like he’s making a move on him. Chuuya is pretty sure he’ll throw up if he moves, anyway. They are allowed to crush into a semi-destroyed pillow fort, in each other’s arms, with popcorns everywhere and the reek of beer on their skin — as long as Chuuya doesn’t get his hopes up. As long as they keep it platonic, Chuuya’s not threatening Mitsuru’s relationship. He’ll never even be his sister's competition, anyway, since Dazai is not into boys.

And, for now, Chuuya is too comfortable to get up.

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s fine.”

Only then Chuuya realizes that Dazai is snoring already — subtle, peaceful snores.
He drags in a sigh, wondering if he should grab some more blankets. At least, Dazai is going to sleep tonight: no Wikipedia reading because he has nothing better to do and no desire to sleep, no mulling over his flaws because, in Chuuya’s hug, he’s not allowed to call himself a fraud.
As he reaches to turn off the TV before the auto player kicks in, careful not to move too much, Chuuya can’t fight the smile that has found its way to his lips.

“Night, ‘Samu,” he whispers, brushing a dark strand away from Dazai’s forehead before nuzzling against the boy’s side.

He melts at how warm Dazai is, and how he searches for Chuuya in

his sleep. He relishes the unfamiliar feeling of Dazai's proximity: his lips on his hair, his hand on Chuuya's hip.
It's almost inaudible, and Dazai is definitely too far gone to hear, but Chuuya falls asleep to the familiar sound of 'Samu's name on his tongue.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading □❤□ You get a cookie for making it so far ❤□ SKK domestic scenes are just so cute and I wanted to write them being supportive of each other ❤□ Poor their neighbors, hearing Disney songs all night 😂
Cry to me on Curious Cat, or Twitter (I'm there as @blind_blossom) and subscribe if you want! And also comments and kudos always make me so happy, so scream at me pls ❤□

Chapter 3: All the way from the start

Chapter Summary

> He'll be damned if he sheds a single tear.
>
> He's not *fucking* crying over Dazai.

Chapter Notes

> CW: Tho there are a bunch of kisses in this chapter, SKK is still the only ship involving Chuuya! The Flags are just very cool with kissing their friends 😁

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai was Chuuya's first kiss.

They both remember the day, even though they're positive the other has forgotten all about it. If they're being honest, in the eyes of an adult it might not have been a proper kiss, but it mattered nonetheless.

It happened on Chuuya's tenth birthday.

Incidentally, it was also the day Chuuya ran away from home.

"Found you, Chibi."

Snot runs down Chuuya's nose as the boy drags his knees against his chest, curling tighter in a ball of sniffles as if he can disappear into it. He doesn't lift his gaze nor relax as the familiar figure in a black school uniform enters his vision, all lanky limbs and an irritatingly obnoxious smile. It's *their* secret spot, yet Chuuya is weirdly annoyed that 'Samu can find him so easily.
The tiny gazebo among the burning red maples of Mori's estate smells like damp wood and fragrant leaves. The old villa turns into a land of spirits and demons, in the mind of a ten-year-old. A haunted mansion that has Chuuya's skin bloom with excited goosebumps whenever the doctor sits him and 'Samu down to tell them stories of ghosts, of dark princes and princesses, of wandering ronin who died in battle.
Chuuya can almost *sense* them, lurking on the ancient grounds.
In Mori's tales, the gazebo is the one spot that belongs to humanity; it

belongs to Dazai, and to *him*.

The structure is not big enough to be a pavilion, though Chuuya likes to think of it as such: when he calls it so, his average life sounds like a fairytale.

Dazai insists it's not a pavilion, but Chuuya doesn't listen to him most of the time, anyway.

"Go away."

"No."

"Go away, 'Samu."

"Paul is worried," Dazai says.

It's non-judgmental as he reaches for Chuuya and sits on the empty bench, resting his cheek on the top of Chuuya's head.
He smells nice, 'Samu, nicer than the rain and the grass.

Chuuya wrinkles his nose, satisfied to hear that his father is at least a tiny bit worried. "Good."

(He *never* said he wasn't a kid with a flair for the dramatics.)

"Do you want to go back?"

"No," Chuuya says, again, hiding his teary face into Dazai's school uniform, relishing in the familiar warmth of his best friend.

It's comforting and *comfortable.*

"Ah, did Chibi make a fuss again~"

"No."

This time it's a lie. Dazai will laugh at him, but Chuuya *did* make a fuss and now he can't go back because he fought with his dad and his sister on his *birthday*. He got angry, yelled and spoiled the day.
But apologies are *scary* and, though Chuuya still doesn't understand why, it's hard to find the courage to say he's sorry.
All he knows is that it must mean he's bad, silly, and a brat. Actually —

"Micchan said I'm a brat," the boy murmurs, voice muffled and split by shame. "So I pushed her."

“Ah.”

“And dad got angry because I didn’t say sorry.”

Dazai hmms.

“You did well.” Willowy arms hold Chuuya tight. “Chuuya may be a brat, *and* a tiny brat too, but you’re better than Mitsuru.”

Chuuya gloats at that, a tentative smile finding its way to his lips.

“I know,” he admits. “I don’t cry when I see a spider. She does.”

“Chibi does too.”

“I don’t!”

“You do, I’ve seen it,” Dazai says — he’s smiling, and that makes Chuuya scowl. But Dazai’s still smiling when he pushes away and rubs unceremoniously his palm over Chuuya’s wet cheek, pretending to not hear the way Chuuya yelps. “Here. That’s better.” The brunet nods to himself. “I also had a present for you, y’know.”

The smile blooms on his face before Chuuya can stop it. *Right!* It is his birthday. “Really?”

“Yes. Chuuya is old now—”

“I’m *not?!”*

“—But I can’t give it to you if your face is all snotty like that.”

Chuuya scrunches his nose. ‘Samu never cares if he’s crying or covered in mud, so it doesn’t sound normal. “Why?”

“I just can’t!”

“Yes, but *why?”*

“Because it’d be disgusting,” Dazai says, sticking his tongue out.

Which doesn’t make sense at all, Chuuya ponders, because why would his runny nose make a present disgusting? *Weird.*
Just like it’s weird how Dazai is acting skittish and impatient, a veil of pink coloring his face.

But it must mean that it’s a nice gift, right?Otherwise, ‘Samu wouldn’t

be this embarrassed.

Containing his smirk, Chuuya imagined it'll be something *beautiful,* like a shiny rare Pokémon card — maybe a Charizard, so Tachihara can be *super* jealous and Fedya will want it too, and will beg to play with him.
It's not like Chuuya will say yes, anyway, because he's loyal to 'Samu; it's them against the world.

Obediently, Chuuya takes a big breath and wipes his face clean with his sleeve.

"...Ok, I'm not crying anymore," he assures.

"Really?"

"Promise."

"Then close your eyes."

"Why?" Chuuya asks, half-curious and half only for the sake of seeing the other boy grimacing.

"Just trust me?"

Chuuya swallows, uncertain, eyelashes flickering closed as careful hands frame his face.
He has just the time to think that *no, this is still weird*, when the other boy swings forward and *doesn't* give him a present.
Chuuya can't decide what it is.
All he knows is that a light pressure on his lips halts his thoughts – it's quick, and it's warm and it's dry and it's *new*.

It's a kiss.

A brush of trembling lips, feather-light and so very fast Chuuya doubts it happened at all before Dazai moves away, skin radiating heat.
Chuuya is no kiss expert (he hates when the French aunts come visit and wrap him into perfume-reeking hugs to smack lipstick stains on his cheeks) but he supposes that this is— *kind* of a kiss.
Obviously, this one is different: he likes Dazai much better than his scary French aunts.

It's also different from the kisses he saw in a movie once, and it doesn't *feel* like the kisses in manga and cartoons and comic books.
Mitsuru is talking about kissing boys all the time now, too, but *if* this

is what she's been blabbering about non-stop… Well, it's not as special as she makes it sound.

When Chuuya opens his eyes, he finds himself confronted with Dazai.

Wide-eyed, scowling, glossy-eyes-and-flushed-cheeks Dazai.

More than the kiss — Chuuya's still not sure how he feels about that, as kisses are really not special at all — his true reward is the expression that veiled his best friend's eyes.
Now, 'Samu is annoying: despite everybody's best efforts, he never shares his genuine reactions. It's like he's playing hide and seek all the time, even when there's no game going on.

Even when Chuuya doesn't *feel* like playing.

Because Chuuya has realized that 'Samu hides from everybody all the time.
He tries to hide from Chuuya, too. The redhead thinks it's a pity — because 'Samu's true self is really, *really* beautiful — but that's another story for another day.

Chuuya's true present is how *honest* Dazai looks — how genuine, how not-in-control, how flustered the boy appears.
His expectant eyes, the fear of having done something wrong shining in them, the crazy red that taints his cheeks.
Dazai just gifted him something precious nobody else is allowed to have.
And maybe it's not a shiny Pokémon card, and maybe Chuuya can't show it to his friends, but it's special all the same.

It only causes a little change in Chuuya, at the beginning. A tiny hiccup in his heart that ripples in warm, lazy waves; like a stone being tossed in a quiet lake, it opens a whole universe of new, bright feelings.

Sinking and sinking.

Expanding, *opening.*

Seeing Dazai like this is better than waking up and knowing it's his birthday, better than the promise of all the presents in the universe.
No matter how hard he tries, Chuuya *can't* find a name for this odd happiness. All he knows is that it's better than eating his favorite food or being praised. It's better than any Christmas morning, brighter than the first day of summer vacation.

“I forgot it was your birthday,” Dazai mumbles, looking away. “This is your present. Deal with it.”

His voice rings thin despite his best effort to sound arrogant.
They both know Dazai didn’t forget, but Chuuya doesn’t waste time calling him out: he leans forward and catches Dazai’s hand.

He’s never been shy, Chuuya, he never held back. He’s never scared of anything, and his friends love him because he’s the bravest kid in his class; he certainly *feels* like the bravest kid in the world.

Not now, though.

Now, he feels terribly *little*; confused, and a little excited. So he squeezes the boy’s hand and hopes the way he’s holding onto it will speak for itself.

“That’s ok,” Chuuya assures, speaking around a beam he can’t control. He squeezes the boy’s hand again. “I think it’s fine to go back now.”

“Is it?” Dazai asks.

His voice rings even lower, and it’s *then* that Chuuya leans forward, placing a kiss on Dazai’s cheek.
There’s no reason for ‘Samu’s skin to be so hot against his mouth, and Chuuya takes a moment to remember how his best friend feels soft and *placid* under his lips.

He knows nothing about kisses, Chuuya.

What he knows *as an adult*, though, is that he doesn’t remember a single present from that day except for the first kiss Dazai gifted him. Out of the thousand times he’s kissed someone, that particular kiss in Mori’s garden remains etched in the forefront of his memory.

He *has* to cling to it, treasure it.

After all, it’s the last kiss Dazai will ever give him.

—

[Present]

“I have to go somewhere tonight. Wanna come?”

Dazai doesn’t even lift his gaze from his textbook when Mitsuru talks.

The round glasses he uses to study slipped down the root of his nose, and his mouth almost brushes against the page as he's hunched over Tolstoj's *The Cossacks.*

He would rather pet a hedgehog than finish this research, but he can't — nor has any desire to — go out with Mitsuru.

The library can have his soul. Hell, the library can have his entire *night* as long as nobody talks to him.

"Where?" he still asks, because he's *supposed* to listen to his girlfriend.

"It's a friend's gig." Mitsuru halts, squinting as if something in that sentence left a sour aftertaste in her mouth. "Well, I suppose 'Tross is mostly *Chuuya's* friend. He plays in a band."

"How cute."

"Do you want to come?"

Wrinkling his nose, Dazai mulls over the possibility.
Sure, he has a terrifying lot of PhD work to finish and Odasaku might scold him, and the recent paperwork he submitted still nags at his ego, but the prospect of finishing early *is* tempting.
The possibility of Chuuya being there is *begging* him to flip off his coursework and accept the invite.

Though— he and Chuuya live *together*. He could just go home.
He doesn't really feel at ease in sweaty, smelly underground clubs that water down cocktails and house degenerates, too.

"Pass."

Mitsuru sighs, quickly stuffing her bag with her iPad and notebooks. "We *should* at least go on a date, y'know."

"Still a pass."

"Chuuya's singing."

Dazai's head snaps up as he registers the information.

Wait.
Wait just a *moment*.
What was that? Did he mishear?

"Oh, I see," he hums, nodding his head and feigning disinterest. "My

apologies, I misinterpreted. Is it a karaoke night for kids?"

Mitsuru slaps him playfully on the head with her last notebook before sticking it in the bag with the rest of her items — she doesn't hit him strong enough to hurt, though, especially when her *words* mauled him already. "Idiot."

"Ouch?"

"He sings, sometimes, when Albatross asks him to." Mitsuru grins. "He's pretty good at it, too."

Ah, he thinks, linking the 'Tross' guy she's talking about to Chuuya's *best friend.* He connects the name to a grinning face covered in thick sunglasses, blonde hair and a short braid.
Chuuya blabbed about him for the last six months.
Chibi's not shy when it comes to sharing fun facts (they are not fun by any means, but Dazai supposes they are indeed *facts*) about his friends and, at this point, Dazai could drop nuggets of info on the so-called Flags as if he *knows* them.

Still, Dazai lifts one eyebrow, pretending to be judgemental. *As if* he wasn't sold on the club idea the moment he heard Chuuya was going to perform.

"I thought Chuuya was a makeup artist, not a choirboy?"

Mitsuru scrunches her nose. "Yeah. But he has a bunch of things he likes."

"I noticed," Dazai agrees. "And you don't like it because…?"

She waves the comment away. "It's not that I don't like it, ok? But I like to study, and I want a steady job. Dads are *fine* with that. Chuuya — he's juggling a lot at the same time, and it's all a bit too creative for my taste."

There's a different flavor to it now: she's worried, although Dazai struggles to understand why. Chuuya is a good person, he has a part-time job and he's an adult who can take care of himself.
A shadow passes across Dazai's face. The way Mitsuru talks about her very much independent brother as if he's still a kid rubs him the wrong way.

"He can look after himself," he says.

“He’s not sure about his future. I’d just want him to find a nice, secure job that *pays* and call it a day.”

“Not everybody wants that kind of life.”

For a moment, she looks at him like he doesn’t understand. Like he doesn’t understand her words, and like she’d want her brother to be more like them. “I’m just relieved he’s living with you. At least *you* can talk to him.”

Now, Dazai is really not sure about it, since he and Chuuya don’t talk much, but there’s no reason Mitsuru should know that.

What he would like is for the girl to show a little faith without burdening *him* with the vexing task of giving TED talks to a shrimp.

“I’ll come,” he declares. “I need more blackmail material on the Slug, anyway.”

And he suddenly needs to show support to Chuuya. Tonight, he wants to scream a little louder that he believes in the Chibikko’s stupid creativity and tacky clothes.
Little does he know, the night is going to test *his* self-control.

—

First of all, Dazai’s not dressed for the occasion.

He’s wearing a cardigan and grey oversized trousers in a club where people dressed in black leather seem ready to sacrifice a goat.

But he realizes he checked in his dignity with his bag at the entrance when Chuuya greets them in a black t-shirt, black hat (what offends Dazai is not the ugliness of the hat, but the fact that Chuuya pulls it off somehow) and black slacks, and Dazai’s heart stutters. *Damn.*

If he weren’t gay panicking, he’d punch the asshole who wolf-whistles while Chuuya approached them — and he’d hide Chuuya in a room, too.
Leather pants should be *illegal* on the Chibikko, because landing his gaze on him turns Dazai’s throat into a desert.

“Nice to see you both,” Chuuya says, quickly hugging Mitsuru. Dazai can’t quite decide if it’s a joke or not. “We’re up next and ‘Tross is having a fit in the bathroom, so—”

“Go rescue him,” Mitsuru nudges him, softly.

“Yeah, sorry. Adam’s at the bar with Ice Man, he can get you guys drinks on the house.”

‘Don’t go.’

It stays trapped in Dazai’s throat, though, stifled by the knowledge that Chuuya *has* to go to his other friend.
Maybe it was a mistake to stop by, he thinks.

Even the *faintest* trace of that thought, though, slips away the moment Chuuya and Albatross show up on the stage.
Chuuya occupies the space like he *owns* the world, leading the crowd with the tiniest tilt of his head, lulling it with the throaty lows and raspy highs of his voice. It’s a rough voice, a deep one.
Albatross is better at singing as far as technique goes, Dazai realizes, his vibrato much steadier and his control over his vocal cords firmer, but the redhead’s charm lingers under the skin.

Before he can try to escape it, Dazai is glamoured.

Chuuya is intimate. He’s a quiet revolution, he’s a vibrato that ripples in Dazai’s bones.

He holds the microphone with both hands like he’s holding a lover, eyes closed, lost and far away from the room — far away from the world they are living in.

And it’s hard to focus on *one* detail when Dazai would want to stop time and devour every inch of the scene.

He’d like to tear this scene away from his memory to keep it safe forever: how Chuuya’s shoulders are casually bent, how he crumples up when he takes in a mouthful of air and how he seems to be fighting a battle of his own in his head.

By the time of the second refrain Dazai’s not minding Albatross at all, the music barely reaching him.
All he can focus on is Chuuya.
And *then*—
Chuuya’s voice dips into a hoarse murmur and goosebumps crawl up Dazai’s arms.

He never heard Chuuya sing sober before — he didn’t even know the boy could sing before they found each other singing to Disney songs

drunk — yet he feels like he knows this sound with his *soul*.

And he's so handsome, too. Naked even completely dressed, emotions *bare* in his voice.
Dazai can't quite peel his gaze away from him; from the leather pants, the russet strands falling free on Chuuya's shoulders, the tilted hat, the lean fingers curled around the microphone.

He sees it, and he sees the umpteenth Chuuya that he is desperate to know.

Gently, Mitsuru leans against him. She's rocking in place.

"He's good, isn't he?" she murmurs.

Dazai doesn't reply. To utter even a word seems a sin.

In silence, Mitsuru rests her head against Dazai's arm, not quite reaching his shoulder.
She's humming when he circles her shoulders absently, his attention still focused on the stage.

He doesn't look at her, running gentle fingers through her hair like he's done so many times when she was younger — affectionate, distracted.

It's not even for the sake of their fake dating pantomime that Dazai is touching Mitsuru's hair: it's to ground himself, and to remind himself to not fall too hard for the boy acting like he doesn't know how *easy* it is to fall in love with him.
He tries to swallow the words of love and poetry and death Chuuya inspires, but a little piece of Dazai's soul crumbles with every note spilling out Chuuya's lips.

And so what if, while he runs gentle fingers down long russet strands, he pretends she's Chuuya.

—

The club is almost empty and about to close when they regroup, and Dazai gets officially introduced to Chuuya's Flags. *"The name is not dumb, by the way, "* Lippmann immediately points out, throwing a pointed glance at a tall guy with a cigarette between his lips and short, spiky brown hair. Dazai forgot his name.
He didn't forget how close he stands to Chuuya all the time, though.

Lippmann is… peculiar, Dazai finds himself thinking.
Charming, and yet casual enough to turn strangers into best friends in the span of a drink. He's the one who leads the scene, he's the one who brings bright bouquets of sunflowers and lilies for Chuuya and Albatross after their performance. He's the heart of the group, as it's strikingly clear to a bystander.

"Good. I think it's time to play," Albatross grins, tilting a brown bottle of Kirin in Dazai's direction. "You know, new boy, we have a tradition."

'New boy.'
The name makes him seethe a little, but, when he looks at Albatross, all he can see is his own reflection in the man's black sunglasses. Soft white eco fur brushes his neck, blending with his short blonde braid, and he's drunk and his voice rings loud in the almost-empty bar.

"I thought the place was closing down," Dazai says, eyebrows shooting up.

Albatross shrugs the comment away.
For a moment, Dazai feels incredibly dumb; it's not openly dismissive, *but*.

It's definitely enough to understand that Chuuya's current best friend might not be his most enthusiastic fan.

"Adam always lets us stay. And there's the initiation!"

"Don't even think about it. It's a dumb tradition," Chuuya growls, downing a shot of mint and vodka in one go. He's wobbling a little, but Dazai doesn't pay him any mind.

"What's that?" he asks, turning in Albatross' direction.

The boy's lips twitch up, curling in a wolfish smile that almost makes Dazai regret getting involved with the Flags. *Almost.* "We always play truth or dare when there's someone new."

"Oh."

"Yay," Mitsuru chimes in, clapping. "Osamu, you *must.* It's gonna be fun!"

Chuuya frowns, a shadow passing over his face. "Yeah, maybe not. And by the way, shitty Dazai is not *new."*

“He’s new to us, and to the Flags’ fantastic gigs,” Lippmann says, raising an index finger.

“Idol boy is right, and I’d like to play,” Dazai interjects, flagging down the barista for another round of drinks he fully intends to offer — he’ll buy Chuuya’s friends with overpriced alcohol, if that’s what it takes. But most of all, he wants to play and be part of Chuuya’s world; the one he had to date *Mitsuru* to discover.

“But—”

“I’m new to Chuuya’s group of friends,” Dazai insists with a cheeky smile. "Please, Chibi?"

Chuuya scoffs, mumbling a ‘suit yourself’ that gets drowned in Albatross’ voice (“One rule: there are no rules.”) and the screeching of bar stools being moved in a circle. Dazai sits down between the tall brunet the others called Ice Man and Mitsuru, right across from Chuuya.
He smirks when the redhead struggles to climb on the stool, but Lippmann cuts him off before he can lodge in a comment.

“Chuuya, your time to shine.”

The redhead rolls his eyes, ignoring how graciously Lippmann curtsied in his direction to start the game. “Truth.”

“Most embarrassing moment of your life?”

“Ugh, *of course* we have to bring that up. When ‘Tross poured coffee on my uniform and it looked like pee.”

“That was years ago.”

“I was giving the graduation speech in front of the entire school,” Chuuya explains, for Dazai’s sake.

A laughter explodes in the boy, unguarded and free as he imagines Chuuya giving a speech looking like a disappointed, wet, angry shrimp.
During the game, Dazai gets to collect pieces of the puzzle that is Chuuya's past: his friends, that embarrassing time Paul walked in on him jerking off, his years in Japan and abroad, his cat and his *hobbies,* all the things the redhead loves.
Dazai doesn’t know Adam, the bar’s owner, but he’s suddenly very grateful that he allows the Flags to stay longer.

After that, it's Mitsuru's turn.
Lippmann dares her to drink a full glass of vodka — which she does — and then turn it on the counter without dropping it — she fails, as the object slips from her hand and crashes to the ground.
Thanks to Ice Man's *truth*, Dazai discovers that the Flags have been together since middle school, and that they *are* as tight-knit as they look.
They kiss. They *showered* together. They camped in Pianoman's car for three nights in Nagoya, all six of them, to sight-see.

It's Mitsuru who first launches on a quest to embarrass her little brother.

"Chuuya, truth or dare?"

"Dare."

"Sit on Dazai's lap," the girl says, breezily. "You always complain you're shorter than him."

Dazai halts, eyes widening as he realizes Mitsuru is talking about him.

Because, hey, he is Dazai. Dazai is *his* name.
Chuuya will sit on *him*.

He's a chair, now.

Oh shit.

He's not ready for this, not ready to have his hands on Chuuya, but the redhead puckers like he's going to war and marches in his direction. Feigning tranquillity, Dazai opens his arms to welcome the redhead on his lap.

"Don't say anything, Mackerel," Chuuya grumbles, but Dazai only flashes him a shit-eating grin.

"I'm a stool, I can't talk."

"Ha. *Very* funny."

When Dazai rests his hand on Chuuya's hip, keeping him in place and ensuring they both don't fall from the stool, his fingers are shaking. The unfamiliar weight of the redhead on his lap makes his breath falter, the warmth that oozes from Chuuya's skin sinking in him with every passing moment. He rests his chin on Chuuya's shoulder, and

automatically Chuuya's hand finds its way in his hair.

Nobody instructed them to *cuddle*, but he's too drunk to question the way they immediately curled into each other's space.

He prays he won't get funny thoughts while Chuuya's sitting on his crotch, though, or he'll be *screwed*.

"How long do I have to stay here for?" Chuuya groans, though his hand stays buried deep in his hair. "Shithead here is damn fucking bony."

"Chuuya doesn't feed me enough."

"Then learn how to cook, asshole?"

"Liars, both of you," the girl says. "You look awfully cozy."

"How long, Micchan?" Dazai encourages her, quietly. He just hopes his voice isn't as fluttering as his heartbeats, because Chuuya has leaned back against his chest and is treading playful fingers through his curls.

"One full turn," Mitsuru finally informs them, as if even one turn with Chuuya's skin on his won't completely devastate Dazai's sanity.

Somehow, though, he survives it; he survives Chuuya playing with his hair, his breath warm and dry on his neck as he turns to explain to Dazai that Lippmann is together with another member of the Flags, and that Ice Man used to be school council president.
Dazai accepts the fragments of a recent past that Chuuya feeds him, perfectly settled on his knees.

Although he hates it when Chuuya gets up to leave, he's strangely relieved.

He thought Mitsuru was toying with him, but then Lippmann dares Albatross to kiss Ice Man and Dazai realizes that the group is… *more* tactile than he expected, and Mitsuru was probably going easy on him.

Expectedly, the kiss is not exactly heated.
It seems more like a peck, with the man groaning that Albatross' breath stinks of nicotine and Albatross planting a smooch on the other's cheek just to piss him off.

—

It will be alright, Chuuya thinks.

It'll come a day when he'll be able to play a stupid truth or dare game with Dazai with the same careless nonchalance he sports with all the Flags. Nothing heals a broken heart like time, but it's soon. Too soon.

For now, it hurts to have Dazai's arms around his waist and know that it's just a game.

And perhaps he's drunk and he hates Mitsuru a little for bringing Dazai along, but Chuuya is not *sure* why he agreed to end up sitting on Dazai's lap, hands and chests and lips *way* too close.

Damn Mitsuru, the boy thinks, she really is a brat. Sitting so close to Dazai is fucking with his head.

He shouldn't be drunk on too many beers and too many feelings, breathing in stale air when all he can feel is Dazai's breath fanning over his face.
When Dazai tilts his head to allow Chuuya to absently toy with his hair and shifts on the stool, moving instinctively closer, another bit of the redhead's resolve shatters to pieces.

And it doesn't really matter now, but Chuuya would give anything to go back and start again.
He'd meet Dazai all over again, introduce him to the Flags, make sure he doesn't leave; make sure he doesn't fall in love with someone else.

But it's late, and it doesn't matter.

—

"Have you ever kissed someone in this group?"

Dazai stops, taking a moment to compute Albatross' question. His eyes search for Chuuya, wondering if the boy remembers.

"I did," he says, voice leveled.

He doesn't *explain*, hoping that everybody will assume it's Mitsuru and that the girl, in turn, will assume it's for the sake of their fake relationship. Chuuya says nothing, wearing a smile that looks a little *frozen* on his lips.

To be fair, Dazai is really not too concerned about the next question that lands on him, because he's sure it'll be a follow-up *truth* to make sure he embarrasses himself by admitting he's kissing Mitsuru. He's kissing his girlfriend, *shocker.*

There's nothing too bad Albatross can ask him.

"New guy. First kiss?"

Ah. Nothing *but* that.

"Huh. Chuuya," Dazai says. He doesn't have to hide it, after all, though he can sense how the redhead turns rigid as four people gawk at them.

"We were kids," Chuuya adds.

"Yeah, I don't even remember why it happened." *Ah, good job,* Dazai thinks to himself, *say that like a liar.* "It was stupid."

"It was my birthday," Chuuya says, and something in Dazai's chest *shrinks.*

"Would you be fine doing it again?" Lippmann asks. Then the other boy turns to Mitsuru, flashing her a charming smirk. "In the spirit of drunk friendship, as always."

"'Lip, you're an absolute bitch. He's with my *sister."*

"I kissed Doc last time, did you see Pianoman throw a tantrum?"

"Dazai is not used to us, 'Lip. Give him some time before traumatizing him."

Waving Chuuya's words away, Lippmann ignores the retort. "Boo, Chuuya. You kiss Albatross all the time, and me and *my* boyfriend, who is completely fine with that. And you kiss Tsujimura, and you don't even like *women.* It's not like it matters." Chuuya does *what?* Dazai's heart trips over itself, but he bites his tongue to let Lippmann continue. "So, if Micchan is ok with it, don't act like a prude."

Mitsuru shrugs. "A peck won't kill my ego."

"But it's weird."

"Agreed," Dazai says, cocking his head to the side in a nod, caught

between the temptation of snatching a kiss and knowing it will be awkward.

Apparently, drunk truth or dare kissing is… normal. Inconsequential. Dazai is not *sure* how he feels about it, but this is not his group, and he won't judge.

Solemnly, wobbling a little with every step, Albatross lands a firm hand on Chuuya's shoulder.

"Come on, O' King of the Sheep," he says. "Are thou a coward?"

"Fuck you, Shakespeare."

Fuck you Shakespeare, indeed.
However, much to his concern and mild enthusiasm, Dazai is not hearing no: all he's hearing is take a chance, give it a *try*.
As if life is encouraging him to test if Chuuya's lips taste as familiar as they look, see if they are as sweet as he imagined they'd be.

"Well," he says, getting up from his stool to move to the redhead. "A dare's a dare."

"You don't have to, Dazai," Chuuya says.

No, he doesn't have to. The question is, does he *want* to?

He harbors too many feelings for the boy in front of him to label this as an 'inconsequential drunk kiss'.

Shivering, Dazai rests his hands on the redhead's shoulders, feeling a weird *responsibility* to carry through this kiss. For the longest time, he hovers over Chuuya.
He hesitates, and the other doesn't *move*, looking at him like a deer caught in the middle of a road.
His lips ghost a breath away from the shorter boy, not daring to close their distance.

Chuuya's eyes shine, anticipation and something else — something like uncertainty — shining in them.
This is not the enthusiastic consent Dazai wants, and he's technically not *free* to kiss Chuuya like he deserves to be kissed anyway.

If it happens, he swears to himself, it'll be with Chuuya throwing himself in his arms, uncaring of others around them; it won't be because someone else asked them to give them a show.

It won't be like *this*.

So Dazai steps away. He can't shake off the haunting doubt of what Chuuya will think of him, if he kisses him now.
Is this a test to see if he's a cheater? It must be.

"Sorry," he murmurs. "I *can't*."

Chuuya nods. 'Thanks,' he mouths, relief overflowing in his blue eyes. Although it stings, Dazai doesn't regret his decision.

Not immediately, at least, though his stomach roils in irritation when Albatross is dared to lift Chuuya's spirit with a kiss of his own. He just dodged a bullet, yet he feels like another one shot right through his heart.

"See, the difference here is that Albatross is not dating my goddamn sister," Chuuya says, glaring at Lippmann. "There's a sibling code."

"Aw, thanks babe," Mitsuru drawls, around the nth beer bottle.

Her words, though, sound distant to Dazai's ears.
'You kiss Albatross all the time,' Lippmann had said, and— and damn, Dazai can see why.

Albatross frames Chuuya's face with an *ease* that shoots a bullet straight through his heart.
Their lips crash while they're still smirking, both too high on the adrenaline from the stage to mind their audience. It's open mouthed, and sloppy, and — thank God, Dazai thinks, seething — short.
But it's also *tender*.
Chuuya's shoulders drop when Albatross kisses him, and he lifts a hand to brush delicate fingers against the boy's wrist.

Dazai hand spasms, closing into a fist as he looks away.

How much can a drunk kiss hurt? The show is over before Dazai can release a shuddering breath, and it's obvious nothing.
Albatross and Chuuya are nothing.
He and Chuuya are nothing, too, and yet…

Yet, *why* is his body screaming to him that he should march forward and claim that kiss he refused, that kiss he now *so* wishes he could take back?
Because Chuuya is not looking at him at all, and it hurts. It burns.

“Disgusting,” the redhead says.

“Awful,” Albatross agrees. He’s grinning.

But everybody laughs, so Dazai swallows the bile and laughs too.

—

Mitsuru grabs him while he’s stepping out for some air, getting a hold of his arm.

“You kissed *Chuuya?”* she asks, eyes wide and reddened by all the drinks she’s bottomed. He can smell beer on her, beer and a mix of nicotine and mint from the cig she shared with Lippmann.

Dazai shrugs the comment away. “Yeah, and your brother also kissed half the room tonight, so does it matter? It was a long time ago.”

“And you say it like *that?* You kissed my little brother, Osamu! How am I supposed to react?”

“I don’t *know,* like it happened literally a decade ago? It didn’t mean anything.”

Mitsuru frowns — eyes darkened by the alcohol in her veins, out of focus. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we were children.” Dazai shrugs. “And if I could go back, I wouldn’t do it again.”

“Os—”

“Drop it, ok?” He growls, looking away. He can’t stand looking at her. Not now, not when the image of Chuuya kissing someone else is a page he wishes he could rip away from his memory. It stirs his demons awake. “It never mattered, and it doesn’t matter now.”

Chuuya swallows around the wad of cotton blocking his throat.

He just wanted to check on Mitsuru when he followed her outside the building, but he never thought he’d accidentally *eavesdrop*.
Now he can’t breathe.
The words he just heard pierced his chest — invisible harrows being shot through him, opening holes that steal the air from his lungs.

Leaning his head against the wall, fingers twitching against the beer bottle he's pressing against his constricted chest, Chuuya smiles to himself.

'It doesn't mean anything,' hurts so much more than the *"I can't"* Dazai uttered before.
That he could understand and respect, even, since it showed that the bastard cared about his sister enough not to humiliate her.
But this? *Damn.*
He's been refused twice during the same night.

"God," he whispers to himself, as the grin cuts his face — stretches his cheeks. "Fuck you. *Of course* it didn't matter."

Swallowing, mouth dry and heart *heavy*, Chuuya grips the bottle until his fingers strangle the glass and slowly pushes away from the wall. He believes he can stand without its aid, he trusts his jittery legs not to give up now and take him the *fuck away* from wherever Dazai is.

No, Dazai is right.

Chuuya wouldn't do it again either, because then he could actually have a meaningful first kiss with someone who won't disappear into thin air.
He could have a first kiss with someone who gives a damn.
Then, maybe, he wouldn't find himself in a club, drunk and blinking away burning tears.

He can't cry — even though his childhood crush just told his *sister* he regrets kissing him.
Shame compresses his chest, leaving him horrified at what she might think of him now. What a sorry bastard he must be, pining after his childhood best friend like they ever had a chance.

He won't cry.
He won't get angry, even though he just tossed the bottle inside the glass bin so hard Albatross jumped and Lippmann yelped, asking him if he's gone mad and if he needs a therapist.
Shit, he thinks, maybe he *does* need a therapist.
The glass smashes against the other bottles in the bin, exploding into a crash that resounds in the empty club; it resonates like thunder in his eardrums.

No, he thinks, he won't cry.

He'll be damned if he sheds a single tear.

He's not *fucking* crying over Dazai.

Chapter End Notes

hank you so much for reading! ❤ WE GOT THE FLAGS!!! I hope you enjoyed their little game, and they WILL have more interactions going forward because I love them so much 😎 Scream at me in the comments, on Curious Cat, or Twitter (I'm there as @blind_blossom) and subscribe if you want! And also, comments and kudos always make me super happy, so scream at me pls ❤

Chapter 4: Misery Business

Chapter Summary

> Chuuya can't keep his feelings to himself. It goes as bad as you expect.

Chapter Notes

> Hello it's make-Chuuya-suffer o'clock

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life hates Dazai.

It's nine in the morning and he already wants to die.

Like every day, he had to elbow his way into a smelly train packed with salarymen, fighting the flow of people swarming to their offices. It was only on his way to university, stuck somewhere between the Maita and Shin Yokohama stations, holding on to a yellow handle for dear life as a woman's heel kept stabbing his foot, that he realized his bag was lighter than it was supposed to be.

Much lighter.

The image of his laptop forgotten on his desk flickers in front of his eyes — mocking his idiotic mind for forgetting the only thing he needs for the day.
He shoulders his way past the crowd, hopping down the train as the doors close.

It's nine in the morning, the sun shines, and Dazai is officially *late*.

He has twenty minutes tops before professor Fukuchi chews his head off, and no other choice but to run back home.
Stupid, he thinks, hopping on the semi-empty carriage. *He's so stupid.*
He repeats the mantra as he runs up the stairs, taking two steps at a time because today of all days the damned elevator decided to go out of order.
One hand closes around the door's handle and the other types in the code to unlock the door.

"Sorry, Chibi, change of plans!" he cries, storming into the house

without even bothering with his shoes. “I completely forg—”

And it’s *then* that his voice dies.

Chuuya stands in front of him, blinking, cerulean eyes so wide they might be glass beads. Dazai's breath breaks, rolling out of his lips in a whistling sound.
His gaze falls on the freckled skin, starred with droplets of water, reddened on his shoulders and elbows, cheeks still glossy with the steam from the recent shower.
And he’s—

“—Naked,” Dazai wheezes.

Oh, wow.

Apart from black boxer briefs, Chuuya’s *naked.*

A mouthful of saliva gets stuck in Dazai's throat as he takes in the scene.
All of it.
Every. Damn. Centimeter of it. He takes in what is in plain sight and the very little that is left to his imagination.

He’s always known that Chuuya exercised, but he didn’t expect the model-athlete figure — the abs for every day of the week, the toned but lean legs, the perfect proportions in a body Dazai always made fun of. The waterfall of auburn hair falling on his shoulder, dark and damp and curly because of Chuuya’s absurd obsession with towel-drying.

He’s *hot.*
I’m-your-wet-dream-at-3-am-did-you-miss-me kind of hot. *Put-hell-to-shame* hot.

And Dazai would look away if he could, but he’s not *that* strong.

He’s not even sure what’s worse: if his eyes, glued to Chuuya’s body, or how his brain is desperately working to find a plausible excuse to lick it.

(Is there a plausible excuse, on God’s green earth, to lick your best friend’s abs?)

Chuuya’s jaw twitches.
It might be a smile, Dazai considers, or he’s about to clock a punch in

his face.

“Eyes up, if you don’t mind, Mackerel,” he says.

A grin dances in the back of his voice, so he might not get punched after all. Still, Dazai can feel heat crawl up his neck and ears.
His fingers twitch as he forces himself to raise his head.

“Ah, so—“ He has to stop, breathe and try again. “Sorry.”

“Did you forget something? I didn’t expect you to be back so soon.”

“Clearly,” he says.

He hopes the one-liners make him sound cool, because he’s genuinely dying inside.
Turns out that he’ll die with the clear silhouette of Chuuya’s dick being the last thing he’s seen. Frankly, he can think of worse ways to die.

“Not my fault you should have texted.”

“I didn’t think it’d be necessary.”

Entertained, Chuuya clicks his tongue. “Well, I hope you don’t need the bathroom. It’s a bit of a mess.”

Hello rock bottom, my old friend.

“Is it?”

“You were supposed to be out, so I took my time.”

For the umpteenth time that morning, Dazai cusses mentally.

On top of everything, he didn’t need the mental image of the other without the last piece of fabric and under the shower— as if he needed more to fantasize about.
Even more infuriatingly, Chuuya doesn’t act like he should cover himself up.
Dazai supposes it's fair, because he’s the one who said he'd be off for the day and he wasn't.

He’s the one with a lecture in twenty minutes and who is running late.

…Oh shit, he’s late.

“Shit, shit, shit, I need to go,” he says. “I forgot my laptop.”

“Then get it and get out of here,” Chuuya replies — which is not helpful, nor encouraging, but plenty sarcastic.

Chuuya flashes him a self-confident smirk before he turns, swaying his hips as he walks away — hopefully, to grab a towel or more covering clothes. Although he hates Chuuya for being sexy on purpose and to torment him, Dazai prays the redhead won’t find one *or* the other. After that, though, the redhead disappears into the bathroom and leaves him free to make a beeline to his bedroom.

“ThEn GeT iT anD GeT OuT oF Here,” he parrots, under his breath. “Easy, if I didn’t have Mr meaty ass walking around like a Greek god —"

“What did you say!?”

“That you’re gross,” Dazai cries over his shoulder.

“Ha!? Fuck you.”

“Fuck you twice~”

(Ah, he *wishes*.)

That morning, he is indeed late.

Late and miserable, because life hates him and he hates *Chuuya*.
The image of red hair, freckled skin and a stupidly perfect body haunts him for the rest of the day.

—

After the gig, Chuuya’s heart has been acting like a *sponge*.
He’s been absorbing every detail, every tiny gesture in Dazai — every movement of the boy’s long limbs, how his bandages are always perfectly arranged and his hair is never combed, every twitch of his sharp jaw.

It’s oddly easy to memorize the little quirks of Dazai’s personality. In him, Chuuya can still see the boy he used to adore.
In the meantime, day after day, he learns new things about *adult*

Dazai.
Some things he knows already: he's a certified genius, a brat, and a fan of canned crab. But he also notices how the brunet diligently texts Mitsuru every morning while they have breakfast, and only stops when Chuuya throws at him crumbles of his croissant from the French bakery downstairs to gain his attention. How he smiles with his eyes whenever Chuuya adds korokke to his bento.
How he's beautiful, how he's *fragile.*

How Dazai is—

"Because we were children. And if I could go back, I wouldn't do it."

—Not *his.*

And every day, the now-familiar heartache intensifies.
It's a lurking feeling of restlessness, an ache languidly throbbing in the back of his head. Not differently from an ever-present migraine, the knowledge that the brunet loves *someone else* trickles into his ribcage as Chuuya gets reacquainted with his old best friend.

Why does it all hurt so much?
One would say this kind of pain sits in the chest, but no: the heartache is in his *head,* numbing him.
Ever since Dazai's announcement, although the pain worsened after what he overheard at the gig, the heartache and feeling of being unwanted and third-wheeling are just... there.

Background noise.

Background *pain.*

Orbiting around Dazai wasn't supposed to be this *difficult.*
Chuuya thought he had gotten over whatever unfinished business he had with him, but the boy's presence resonates with a deep, unexplored feeling in his head and his heart and his *stomach.*

It sucks, really.

In hindsight, Chuuya supposes things were bound to spiral out of control.

—

The day their balance shifts, Mitsuru is loitering in Dazai's room.

It's just another day of pretending, Dazai supposes.
Just another day of a fake relationship being the truest thing in his otherwise empty life.

Mitsuru stopped at his house after a day spent in the library, and Chuuya dined with them.
For the sake of their pantomime, Misturu gushed about *them* all the time, pointing out how much *better* Dazai is compared to Fujiwara. She called him attentive and caring, and *hot,* and Dazai pretended to be humbled by the praises.
Pretending to gag, Chuuya scooped up big mouthfuls of curry and didn't comment.

However, he didn't have to add anything to the conversation, and Mitsuru didn't need his input; Chuuya has been cast in a silent role. The witness, the *audience.*

And Dazai has to give it to Mitsuru, she is *committed.*

In a way or another, she's been touching him all evening — brushes of fingers, her foot bumping into his ankle under the table — to convince Chuuya that they are, indeed, together.

After dinner, Chuuya retreated into his room while Mitsuru dragged Dazai away to "study".

Which, in relationship language, means "kiss".

In *fake* relationship language, though, it means Dazai is still fully dressed and lazily scrolling through his Instagram feed while Mitsuru snoops through his bookcase. Her lean fingers brush the white plastic of the Ikea shelves, jumping from novel to essay with no real interest.

From the bed, Dazai side-glances at the closed door and at the girl standing in front of the bookcase. Her skin is less freckled than Chuuya's, he notices, her hair more caramel-brown. Chuuya's locks have the maple-red hues of an autumn day.
Her lashes are long, and her side profile is delicate as she studies the books.

"Ne," he beings. "You sure you want to stay here? We could all watch a movie or something."

Mitsuru flicks her long hair off her shoulder before her curious hands

find another book. It's a bibliography in a teal jacket Dazai never got around to reading, and bought solely for the aesthetic cover. He does it, sometimes; he fixates on pretty things. Often, he forgets them soon enough.
He never fully appreciates them, because beauty and treasures are lost on him.
Just like Chuuya.
Mitsuru must not be impressed with the book, though, because she tosses it back after a glance.

"Nah. Here's fine."

“Chuuya might assume things,” he offers.

Mitsuru grins. “Good. It’s *exactly* the point. If we’re lucky and annoying enough, he’ll complain to Tei-kun.” She tosses a paperback back into the library with a subtle scoff. “Anyway, it’s been a while since I have annoyed my cute little brother.”

Dazai scrolls down the social network with a hum.

So many pictures of girls he’s seen once — and puppies, and home decor, and a rabbit fetching a tennis ball, and a seal puppy that reminds him of Chuuya, and more girls, and some girls he follows on OnlyFans. This is *boring.*

It would be so easy to tug Mitsuru down and kiss her.

It’d be easy to make this arrangement a tiny bit *real,* no strings attached.
At least, it could be *fun.* It’d be nothing Dazai hasn't done before: talk a bit, pretend to be interested in each other, end up in the same bed, kiss, maybe *more.*
The downside is, his hook-ups never tend to stick around for long after Dazai has reduced them to a one-night stand and a bunch of unanswered messages.

The point is that he *knows* how these things go.

Normally he prefers love hotels unless Chuuya is out of town, but Mitsuru is *here*.
Dazai imagines that, like the others, she would be soft and mellow — she’d part her lips to let him go deeper, to let him taste her.
She’d be dough under his skilled hands.
She’d not be enough.

She’s not *Chuuya.*

Treacherous, his mind flies to the redhead in the other room.
It goes back to the night of the gig, and to the way Dazai couldn’t kiss him even though he desperately wanted to. It’s enough to make his stomach churn, making him *miss* and *want* the other boy — which is pretty damn stupid, he supposes, since Chuuya doesn’t like him.

Forcing a smile to his lips, the brunet turns to Mitsuru. "So you want to annoy the Chibikko?"

"Not going to lie, I kinda think he deserves it. I hope he's jealous that his boring, average-looking big sister has a boyfriend and he doesn't."

“You’re better than average-looking.”

“You’ve met my brother,” she says. Which shuts Dazai up because it’s a *fair* point. “Unique appearance, piercing eyes, stupidly fit body? I have to make him pay for winning the DNA lottery.”

“That’s very mature,” Dazai hums.

“I’m the smart sibling, Osamu, not the mature one. Catch up.”

“You’re really a pest.”

“Said the boy who teases Chuuya for being *short*,” she says, rolling her eyes. She’s holding a Stephen King novel that Dazai never finished reading, skimming through the pages.

“It’s different.”

“Is it, though?”

For a moment, Dazai fears she might suspect something — he fears that she might have seen right through him, noticing the way his heart skips a beat whenever he remembers how *delicate* Chuuya’s skin feels under his fingertips, how beautifully the sun paints his locks with brassy undertones.
His is a soft-spoken, *disenchanted* kind of love, tiptoeing between continuous *maybe*s and dreadful *never*s. He thought he'd been able to conceal it, but maybe it was wishful thinking.

“It is,” he says, ever so slowly. “I can tease the Chibi because I’m his best friend.”

“Former best friend, I'd say. Still, you do a *wonderful* job,” Mitsuru assures. “How do I convince your lazy ass to use that lovely talent of yours and annoy Chuuya with me?” Her lips quirk up. “A tiny bit, at least.”

"Do you have something in mind?"

“Hm, I don’t know. We could make him jealous?” Mitsuru offers, with an angelic smile flashing across her face. "I love it when he's all embarrassed and flustered."

The plan is so low effort, so *innocent,* that Dazai can’t explode in a hearty laugh.
He’s impressed, genuinely so. It reminds him that, when Mitsuru’s around, he's not *necessarily* the worst person in the room.
It also reminds him why, in a life punctuated with meaningless one-night stands, he never tried to make a move on her: he couldn’t bear losing *her* friendship.

“You're really committed, aren't you?"

"Terribly." The girl shoots him a smile, dark eyelashes flickering over doe-like eyes. "But, hey, seriously, can I stay over? To, y’know, make the dating thing believable.”

Skimming through his Instagram feed, Dazai shrugs the question away.
Maybe he should download a dating app, he considers; perhaps he can fuck Chuuya out of his system.

“Of course. If you don’t mind sharing a bed,” he says.

Mitsuru’s eyes glitter like a child on a field trip.

“Yay!” She squeals, jumping to the bed. “Cuddle party!”

“Wait—”

“Oh, *darling,* I can’t wait to steal your t-shirts.”

Defeated, Dazai bets the innocent Bambi eyes worked on many boys. As he rolls his eyes to the ceiling and opens his drawers for Mitsuru to pick something comfortable to wear, he supposes that he’s mature enough to share a bed with a friend without irreparable consequences.

Or so he hopes.

—

This can’t be happening.

It’s a nightmare.

Chuuya kicks the wall when the springs from Dazai’s bed start crying and a female voice — *Mitsuru’s*, no doubt — screams something about Dazai’s shirt.
Fucking *hell.*

For a moment more, he can hear barely concealed chuckles on the other side of the wall, then nothing. The silence tortures him more than the chuckles, his imagination running *wild.*
Then, out of the blue, the redhead hears a deep sigh that makes his hair stand on the back of his neck —then, a *thud.*

With a muffled cry, Chuuya hides his face in the pillow.

“Hands off my sister," he mumbles, not daring to speak the words above an annoyed, growly whisper.
'Hands off my sister and get busy with *me*' would be a less hypocritical request, and the redhead wonders if that makes him a deranged person or just a lame one.

He grabs his phone to exorcise the thought, knowing exactly where to seek help and support: the Flags' group chat. He ignores a dozen notifications popping on the screen as he types up a message.

To: Fandom of the Opera
From: Chuuya
// I can’t believe it.
// My sister is having sex while I’m in the next room.

Now, he’s probably being overly dramatic.
Dazai might not be the perfect housemate, but he never really has sex while *he* is awake in the house too. No: he and Mitsuru will likely make out until they fall asleep, limbs tangled and breaths in synch and hands intertwined.
Which is terrible enough, but…

Mitsuru holding Dazai.

Mitsuru touching *'Samu.*

She's kissing that mouth, touching the bandages, combing through the mass of soft, *soft* curls, and Chuuya is not jealous — he doesn't have any expectations after that talk he overheard — but he is *angry* beyond reason.
The first reply drags him out of his moping.

From: Lippmann
// The disrespect.

From: Doc
// Maybe go on a stroll?

From: Snow (Ice) Man
// Put on headphones?
// It's not like you can do anything about it.

Chuuya wrinkles his nose, assessing the possible damages of yeeting the phone to the other end of the room before deciding it's not worth it.
He won't address how Doc is suggesting a stroll at ten in the evening (where the hell is he supposed to go, anyway? The vending machines down the street?), but Ice Man is calling him out hard.
He should put on some headphones and mind his own business.
He *really* should.

From: Chuuya
// Helpful, thanks

From: Tross
// tbh he has a point
// don't pretend you don't want to bang Dazai

And 'Tross, ladies and gents. His so-called best friend.
The man who, when they were sixteen, swore they were a *ride or die* kind of pair.
The Nutella to his bread.
The noodles to his ramen.
The person who might hate him most in the entire world, too, because he keeps saying exactly what Chuuya doesn't want to hear.

From: Chuuya
// Politely, go fuck yourself

From: Tross

// Politely, quit brooding 💕

Chuuya sighs, trying to brush the comments off.
Again, he buries his head in his pillow and stifles a scream in the fabric.

When his phone vibrates, he can't be bothered to check the notification before swiping up. With the ongoing conversation, he assumes it's the group chat calling him a sore loser.
His stomach takes a leap off the metaphorical staircase, though, when his eyes land on Dazai's name on the screen.

He assumed *wrong*.

From: Dazai
// Do you mind if Mitsuru stays over?

Chuuya blinks.
Once, twice.
Unsurprisingly, no matter how strongly he wishes it, the words don't rearrange themselves — the text stays like that, an absurd question that Chuuya's brain is refusing to compute.

What. The. *Hell*.

To: Dazai
// Duh?! No way
// Get her a taxi ffs

From: Dazai
// Are you serious?

He's about to text that he's *incredibly* serious, and Dazai could wait to shag his sister at least until Chuuya is out of the house, when another soft thud from the other bedroom causes him to freeze.
If the redhead suspected Dazai and Mitsuru were making out before, after the noise — the mattress singing under the weight of two bodies, and giggles and whispers — he's *sure* of it.

He damns the paper-thin walls, and the squeak he hears a few moments after. Then Mitsuru's voice, clear as day, ringing with delight:
"Osamu?" he hears from the other side. "How are you even alive? Your hands are cold."

With a sigh, Chuuya damns himself for allowing his dumb housemate

to trap him in the weirdest predicament in *history*.
It would have been weird anyway if Dazai had brought a girl home, considering that the walls are so thin he might as well be sitting in front of the Mackerel's bed with a front-row seat to the sex, but the fact that Dazai is with his *sister* makes it even worse.

In that moment, Chuuya decides he can't deal with it.

Call him a terrible person, he can't.

To: Dazai
// Do whatever the fuck you want, I guess
// You don't need my fucking permission anyway

The message gets delivered, but Dazai is too busy to read it.

—

"Do you have chips somewhere?"

Dazai's eyebrows arch as he adjusts on the bed, his side pressed against Mitsuru's hip. Since the girl stole both his pillows, Dazai's back rests against the headboard, his ankles crossed as he flaunts his mismatched socks.
Mitsuru called him 'a fashion dumpster fire' because of them, but the boy shrugged it off. He wears *bandages,* mismatched neon socks are by far his tamest fashion choice.

"Do I look like someone who eats chips in bed to you?" he volleys back.

"No. You're far too boring for that."

"Great answer."

"Not even candies?"

"Might have to ask Ranpo for that."

"Do you have beers, then? Like a secret stash under the floor or something."

"What are you, an alcoholic?"

Which, admittedly, would be on-brand since he's found Chuuya's

secret wine stash a while ago, and is quite sure Verlaine had one too. Dazai is sure that his best friend would have a minor mental breakdown in a house without wine.
Grimacing, Mitsuru stops.
Then, she smiles — and Dazai already *knows* he won't like the question.

“Do you have condoms?”

Dazai’s eyebrows disappear behind his fringe. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you. Why?”

“I don’t know, we could fill them up with water and see when they explode,” she says, squirming against Dazai’s body. “Or actually use them.”

“Yeah, *no*.”

With a tut, Mitsuru relaxes against the pillows. “Glad we both still agree on that.” Her head perks up. “Ah. Did I ever tell you about that one time Chuuya was dating an absolute prick?”

“No,” Dazai says.

Even though he doesn’t particularly die to know about it, either, Mitsuru’s face morphs into a scowl.

“The cricket team’s captain. Terrible player. I hated him. *You* would have hated him too, y'know. But, of course, my brother falls for the ones that treat him like shit. And so, this one evening, Chuuya barges into my room to ask me if I have any condoms. *After* I told him to dump that idiot. Can you believe it!?”

Dazai chuckles. “I absolutely can, yes.”

“He was so desperate to be liked by this guy.” Taking a moment, Mitsuru hums. “Normally he’s shy about these things, but not that time. Dads were watching TV in the living room and we had a no-closed-doors rule, but Chuuya didn’t care. Not that one time. He stalked into my room and asked if I had a condom because he *was* going to get laid.”

“And what did you say?”

“That my innocence had been tainted, and I had to bleach my ears.” She grins, mischief glittering in her eyes. In Dazai’s old grey shirt, she

looks tiny. “And that fucking a tree would have been a better investment of his time.”

“You’re impossible,” he comments, feigning disinterest and hoping Mitsuru will drop the matter.

With every word, Dazai’s heart shrivels a little.
It’s hard to not be jealous of Chuuya’s past; he never got to be a part of it.

He doesn’t care about the one time Chuuya swore he was in love, or when he risked getting caught in a compromising situation because he liked a boy enough and didn’t care about the consequences.
He doesn’t want to know.
Mitsuru doesn’t listen, though.
She *has* to continue her retelling of how desperately Chuuya made a fool of himself — all for a condom.

All for a *boy*.

“—So they got caught, and I ended up in trouble. I’m telling you, my brother has no chills when it comes to boys.”

The memory of Albatross flashes in front of Dazai’s eyes — the boy’s hands framing Chuuya’s face, Chuuya’s lips covering his grinning mouth.

“Yeah, I noticed,” he growls.

“That time was so embarrassing. I hated it. Actually…” As her voice dies off Mitsuru straightens up, cupping her mouth with her hands. Dazai doesn’t even have the time to realize what’s going on as she screams: “I guess it’s *really* time I take off this shirt!”

Dazai’s breath catches between a chuckle and a gasp.

“What are you…?”

“Payback,” she whispers, shooting him a smirk. “And we’re annoying Chuuya.” Then, louder: “Chuuya!” A second of pause. “Chuuya, can you go out? Have a walk. We’re about to get loud here.”

Silence answers them.
One, two, five seconds. Dazai holds his breath, too stunned to react.

When they hear a muffled *ha?!* from Chuuya’s room, Mitsuru’s grin

cuts her face from cheek to cheek.

“And do you have spare condoms? *‘Samu* needs one.”

The way her eyes glimmer with mirth steals a smile out of the brunet, too.

Mitsuru is diabolical when she plans on something — a stubbornness she shares with her brother, although she’s more subtle about it. Dazai always prided himself on being *good* at picking on Chuuya, pushing his buttons to make the boy react, but Mitsuru? She had a whole life to master the art of pissing off her brother.
She’s convincing, too.
Hell, the girl has dragged him into a fake relationship, and how they are sharing *fake* sexual innuendos.

However, the door that slams a moment later, making Dazai wince, is very much real.

“I’m going out,” he hears Chuuya bark from outside. “Fuck you both.”

It doesn’t sound playfully annoyed, though.
It doesn’t sound flustered at all: it sounds *angry*.

Dazai doesn’t waste a second thinking about what he should do. His body moves on sheer instinct.
After exchanging a surprised look with Misturu, Dazai jumps on his feet and bullets out of the door, running after Chuuya.

He finds the redhead in the entrance, halfway to the genkan; even though the redhead is wearing the grey sweater he normally wears for bedtime, hair tied up in a messy knot, he's headed to his shoes and his jacket.
It takes Dazai less than a glance to realize he's *seriously* ready to storm out.

“Chuuya—”

“Oh, hello,” Chuuya hisses, spinning on his heels. The first thing he notices is his poppy red cheeks, his blue eyes incandescent with frustration. “I’m going, ok? *Happy?* I’ll sleep at Pianoman’s or whatever.”

“Wait, no—“

“Or I’ll take a walk. *Jesus*. Can’t you get a goddamn hotel?”

“Chuuya, stop,” Dazai interrupts him, stepping forward. Closing *some* of their distance, though he yearns for more. “We were joking.”

It’s weak, and it falls flat, and they both know it’s not an excuse, yet it works.
Somehow, it makes Chuuya blink and breathe. He stops, lips parted in an ‘o’.
It’s only thanks to the way he turns, eyes finding something — *someone* — behind Dazai, that the brunet realizes Mitsuru has joined them.

“Oh, you’re—” His breath stutters, and the redhead's eyes roam his face as if he's scrambling for the right words. “Not… undressed. I guess.”

Immediately, Dazai nods.
He’s not sure if Mitsuru nods too, and doesn’t dare glance at her.

“Of course not, silly,” Mitsuru says, tugging at Dazai’s t-shirt covering her as if to say, *‘see? Still clothed’*. “I suggested we could annoy you. Dazai just gave me an old thing to sleep in.”

She doesn’t talk about why she *implied* they were doing something; she doesn’t call him ‘Samu again nor mentions Chuuya’s ex, but Dazai has a feeling nothing of that matters anymore.
It won’t change the flush on Chuuya’s face, and the hurt expression in his eyes.
It won’t change how the redhead is clenching his fists.

“So you’re not…”

Mitsuru shakes her head. “Oh, no. I was making fun of you.”

“Ah, right,” Chuuya hisses, eyes narrowing. “Make fun of the one left out. Bet you guys were having a ball.”

And *that’s* what breaks Dazai.
Not the insults, not the awkwardness and annoyance kindling Chuuya’s eyes: it’s the patience, the sadness, that feeling of being unwanted. He made Chuuya, the same kid who said he’d marry him so Dazai would never be alone or out of place, feel *unwanted*.
Suddenly, it feels inexcusable.

“I’m sorry, Chuuya,” he says. “It was a joke.”

“It *was* kind of dumb,” Mitsuru interjects, falling into step and next to

Dazai. “I hoped you’d be embarrassed, not… angry.”

It’s not much, but it’s the truth.
The apology seems to slap Chuuya, suddenly hyper-aware of his outburst.

“No. No, *I’m* sorry,” the redhead says. “It’s just, it was odd. I could hear you from my room.”

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“Thin walls,” Dazai mumbles in Chuuya's defense, as if it can excuse anything about what they were doing. Chuuya flashes him a quick smile — watered down by an emotion Dazai can’t quite pinpoint — before turning to his sister.

“No, Mitsuru, I wasn't eavesdropping. Fuck you, by the way.”

“Why, because I played with your tender sensibility? So what should I do, *announce* to you I’m having sex with my boyfriend?”

Chuuya squints. “I’d just appreciate a heads up so I can leave. You *can* have sex. I don’t *care.”*

“Yet you obviously have opinions about it,” Mitsuru says, crossing her arms to her chest.

“Well, yes, I do? I don't *particularly* like the idea of being around, sorry if I find it *gross*.” Chuuya’s voice is somber, so devoid of any emotion that it sends a shiver down Dazai’s spine. “Look, maybe I’m overreacting. I just need time. And I don’t want us to fight because you guys are dating.” A pause. A sigh. “*Please.”*

"Then don't be a brat about it," Mitsuru says. “We’re sorry, ok? There’s no need to act like we didn’t invite you to a party.”

For a moment, Dazai fears they’ll fight.
He might not have siblings, he might not even have many friends, but he *knows* what an emotional storm looks like. So, although he has no right to butt in, he readies himself to stop the argument.
Then, unexpectedly, Chuuya’s shoulders fall.
His hands unclench, his fingers relax, and his scowl melts into an exhausted line.

“You’re a jerk, honestly. You *know* I—” With a sigh, Chuuya rakes one hand through his hair. His voice dies. “You know what? It’s fine.

You're right. I've had a bad day, and I'm lashing out at you two for no reason."

"No," the girl says. "It's not *fine*. 'I know' what?"

"Really, Mitsuru, forget it. It's nothing."

"No, it's not."

"Well, it kinda *is."*

Mitsuru squints, interrupting her brother before he can rack up more excuses. "You're super exaggerating, but don't bottle up. If you're mad, say it."

"I'm not mad."

"Or you could do us a favor and tell us what this is *really* about. Is it about work?"

A quiet form of worry is woven in her voice, making it thin.
And Dazai appreciates her concern, he might even *share* it, but he's had enough. He just wants to hug Chuuya.

"Micchan, I'm sorry, can you leave us?" He chimes in, quietly. "I'll call you a taxi. I just think the chibi needs some space."

—

Us.

Chuuya's head snaps up.

Dazai should be on his girlfriend's side — and on some level, Chuuya is offended on his sister's behalf.
Although Mitsuru looks as fed up as that one time, in high school, Chuuya refused to cry when he broke his arm during volleyball training, she still nods.
In her eyes, Chuuya can't find any trace of offense or hurt: she seems worried for him, which is pretty fucking hypocritical after calling Dazai 'Samu' to his face.

Some things are not for Mitsuru to share. Some things are *his.*

She can have Dazai's future. That's *hers.*
Dazai picked her.

Dazai's past, though? She can let Chuuya keep at least *that.*

He almost told her.

You know I, what?
I've always liked Dazai? I'm in pain?
I feel stuck in a past that you two are pulling away from under my feet?

The thing is, she *doesn't* know. He just expected her to understand, and bow and let him have Dazai. He's a brat who wants his sister's toys and doesn't even say it out loud.

Only, Dazai was never a toy Chuuya can own, although he's always been a *regret;* an old phantom from a past he wishes he could change. Now, he's slipping through Chuuya's fingers even though he's closer than he's ever been.

As he mulls over the truth that he almost spilled out, the redhead allows his sister to squeeze him in a hug before collecting her bag and slipping back into Dazai's room to call a taxi.
Half an hour later, she texts Chuuya that she's safely home. She's sorry, she repeats — and, again, Chuuya assures her it's nothing. It's fine.
Once again, he tries his best to make it believable, stifling down the anger because Samu's name on his sister's mouth set off a fire Chuuya is not quite sure how to quench.

Even though Dazai wrapped him in a blanket, poured him a glass of wine and joined him on the couch, he can't quite shush the voice in his mind calling him an asshat.
He should confess or let go.

He shouldn't have Dazai next to him, pretending to be enjoying a third-rate true crime show because there's nothing else on TV.
Dazai should be with his girlfriend.
Mitsuru should be allowed to enjoy her relationship.
And *he* is a sorry ass with no right to be passive-aggressive about a relationship he said he accepted, though it's silently ripping him apart.

Oh, Lord.

The Flags are right.

He's *awful.*

“I’m a terrible person,” he murmurs, his mouth brushing the edge of the blanket. Dazai wrapped him in a burrito, but Chuuya didn’t fail to notice how he is keeping a safe distance.

“You’re not.”

“I am.”

“It’s alright. Chuuya’s a dog, so I expected him to start yapping once ignored.”

“Stop being *nice* when you should be annoyed.” He sighs. Part of him wants to reach the wine on the coffee table, but his limbs refuse to move. “I didn’t mean to lose my shit like that. I don’t know what happened. It’s just—”

“She’s your sister,” Dazai interrupts him.

Chuuya stops, gawking.

“What?”

“She’s your sister,” Dazai repeats, scanning the words as if he’s talking to a dog — and not a smart one. “Of course, you don’t feel comfortable with me being intimate with her in your own home while you’re around.” *Our home*, Chuuya corrects mentally. But he’s also aware it changes nothing, so he saves his breath and allows Dazai to go on. “You know how I normally treat my hook-ups. And, though I promise you that Mitsuru is not like the others, you said you need time. We shouldn’t have teased you about it, and I understand.”

No, Chuuya thinks, his heart trapped in his throat, *you didn’t understand shit.*
However, on a level, he’s glad that Dazai is jumping to conclusions; he doesn’t have to explain anything, as long as Dazai believes whatever he wants to believe.

It makes things easier, though it hurts nonetheless.

“Well, yeah. Thank you for being, y’know… understanding and shit.”

Way to go, Chuuya. Call your crush ‘understanding and shit’ after storming out like a spoiled brat because he was having some normal alone time with his girlfriend.
That will score you brownie points.
That is, if he doesn’t already think you’re a lunatic.

Dazai's gaze sharpens, and Chuuya swears it's judgmental and a tiny bit confused. "Is that a good thing?"

Chuuya wriggles in place, wishing he could headbutt a wall and forget about the whole evening. "Don't be a jerk. You know it is."

"Then you're welcome."

"And I *was* a bit of an ass."

Dazai shakes his head. "It's alright. We don't have to talk about it anymore."

Which would be great, Chuuya supposes, if it didn't prompt him to blurt out something different. Something entirely worse that has been haunting him ever since he overheard Dazai and Mitsuru at the bar.

"Do you regret our first kiss?"

Dazai looks at him wide-eyed, and only *then* does Chuuya realize what he just asked.

"I'm sorry, I'm not following."

"Ah— I don't mean first kiss as in, there'll be a second." Oh, shit. *Shit.* "I mean, our only kiss. Not that I want to kiss you ever again, I'd puke and die."

"Yes, Chuuya, same."

Why does it sound so sharply sarcastic? So *annoyed*? "But do you regret it?"

Dazai stares at him for the longest time.

"Do you?" he asks back. It's unnecessarily cryptic, and not an answer at all.
But then, after what feels like a lifetime of silence, Dazai scoffs. "Come here," he says — and his voice is unfairly tender for someone who doesn't like him romantically at *all.*

It shouldn't feel so right.

Chuuya shouldn't be familiar with the way Dazai guides him against his chest, folding his lanky limbs around Chuuya's shoulders. He shouldn't know by heart Dazai's unique scent, a mix of fresh gauze

and mint, and the pacing of his heart and the rise and fall of his breathing.
He shouldn't let out a whiny noise from the back of his throat the moment his head rests on Dazai's body.

But, good intentions be damned, Chuuya's treacherous brain glitches the moment his friend's arms shroud him.

"You can't hug me whenever I'm pissed," he growls, still accommodating himself in the safe circle of Dazai's arms.

He can feel the other grin against the side of his head.

"Guess we'll have to test it out."

"Ugh. If we must."

"Good boy. If Chuuya acts like a good dog, I'll give him a treat."

Chuuya's heart hiccups, because his best friend is using his tender voice again — the *everything is going to be alright* tone.
He sinks deeper in Dazai's arms, disappearing in the hug and basking in its warmth.

"This TV show sucks," he murmurs, to clear the air.

"Can't say you're wrong." Dazai hesitates. "So... we're still friends?"

Chuuya's heart breaks a little at that question.

"Of course," he murmurs. "You're my friend."

At the end of the day, Chuuya doesn't know if Dazai regrets their first kiss.
Maybe he does.
Maybe he'll never answer, and Chuuya will never know.

What he knows is that he asks Dazai to not let go of him till morning, and he doesn't.

—

From: Mitsuru
// Do you think he's ok? He doesn't normally *explode* like that
// Well, he does. Sometimes. But I didn't know he was so stressed. I'm sorry.
// Thanks, btw

// I owe you one.

From: Dazai
// It's all good, really
// I just thought he might want to be at home alone

From: Mitsuru
// I should have stayed.
// Am I a terrible sister?

From: Dazai
// No, you're not

From: Mitsuru
// Is he still mad?

From: Dazai
// A bit. But I made him popcorn and wine, he should be fine now.

From Mitsuru
// Seriously, Osamu
// You two scare me sometimes

With Chuuya's head on his chest, Dazai glances at the phone.
The redhead is snoring, hugging his arm like an overgrown, drooling koala. With a snort, he thinks that Chuuya is the entire zoo; a shrimp, a dog, a seal, a koala. He's *so* many adorable things.
And, as the redhead nuzzles against his side and growls something about wine and being tired, Dazai supposes that he and Chuuya's favorite teddy bear share something more than a name, tonight.

They share a *purpose*.

From: Dazai
// I know

He scares himself too, most days. He doesn't trust himself around Chuuya, carrying around his secrets like a burden.
If he gets too close, he'll have to tell Chuuya about *that*.

He'll have to tell Chuuya about the things he's done to feel alive.

But it's getting harder to deny that he's into the boy who fell asleep quite *literally* on him after causing a scene and worrying everybody in the house.

It's scary, how quickly this situation is evolving.
It's stirring old demons awake.

But, for someone caught in a fake relationship, he *really* likes Chuuya.

—

Nakahara Mitsuru has ninety-nine problems, and her ex-boyfriend is all of them.

When Fujiwara Teika asked if they could talk and guided her to a corner of the empty hallway, she pretended she didn't almost faint.

He's so *handsome*, in his blue polo shirt and white slacks — she can almost forgive him for the white tennis shoes. He also cut his hair too short. It used to be chocolate-brown but, over time, Mitsuru has learned to discern golden highlights in it.

Normally she'd judge the hell out of someone dressed like a cover of a Nautical magazine with no ship *nor* Ralph Lauren shop in sight, but Fujiwara pulls it off. Somehow. Damn, he'd pull off anything.
And he is way too handsome to be approaching her in the university corridor like he's not causing her an aneurysm every time their eyes meet — like he doesn't know his cologne still lingers on her pillow, and that she inhales it deeply every evening as she falls asleep.
A fire kindles the depth of his green eyes as he pulls her to the side.

(And she thought that fire was long gone, that they'd exhausted the flame. Guess she was wrong.)

"What are you doing, dating Dazai? He's an asshole."

Oh, so it's that.
The plan is *working*.

She flashes him a smirk.

"Why? We've been friends forever. He lives with my brother and—well, relationships evolve, I guess."

He clicks his tongue. "Yeah. *Sure."*

"Why? I'll have you know that Dazai is a gentleman."

Wrinkling his nose, Fujiwara steps closer. "He's a fuckboy."

Although she can't in all honestly fight that statement, Mitsuru's lips tighten.
She has rehearsed this part a thousand times in his head, but she's finding that she's much more annoyed on Dazai's behalf than she imagined she would be. "You don't know him."

"No. I don't even want to, honestly. But a guy who can't keep a girl like that? It's weird."

"Excuse me, you're calling my boyfriend a psycho?"

Exasperated, Fujiwara throws his hands up. "No. I'm just saying he's not a nice guy. Everybody has said it for ages."

As he gnaws at her bottom lip, Mitsuru swallows the need to ask what, exactly, everybody is gossiping about.
She knows what people say, and she knows Dazai is not as popular as he might appear — he's pissed off too many guys and hurt too many girls to be 'the hot genius who fucks around'.
He's 'the *judgmental asshole* who fucks around', now.

And she spent enough years loving the man in front of her to know he speaks without thinking, sometimes, and that his words hurt even if he doesn't mean to — but that's not an excuse.
She looks right into Fujiwara's eyes, his green and her blue. She takes a moment to dampen down the annoyance simmering in her guts.

"Tei-kun, you realize that you're sounding like an absolute asshole, right?"

"Am I? Sorry if I'm worried that some bastard might be taking advantage of you."

"But I like Dazai," she says.
It's *true,* yet it catches them both off guard.

"Do you?"

"I'm learning to," she admits. "So, please, try to be kind to him."

Although Fujiwara's head bobs down, and he looks apologetic as he runs a hand through his chestnut-brown hair, the stone weighing on her chest remains.

"So you like-*like* this guy?"

“I— maybe? He’s been good to me so far."

“Ok, then,” Fujiwara says, reaching for her hand.

Her heart stutters as his thumb skims over the back of her hand, tracing soothing circles. It brushes the knuckles with a gentle pressure, and it's a new and familiar feeling at the same time.
She wanted him to be jealous, not to fight. Just like it happened with Chuuya, though, she has a hunch she's not as in control as she thought she would be; maybe, people are not as predictable as they appear to be. Maybe she was *wrong*.

Her voice quivers as she murmurs: “But I don’t like it when you act like a dick, really. Dazai has been in my life forever.”

Besides, she knows how mean people can be with what they don’t understand. She grew up with two dads and a gay brother; he knows how deep rumors cut, how they hurt.

Slowly, almost painfully, Fujiwara lets go of her hand. He is still giving her the puppy eyes, jealousy lurking in the back of his voice, and Mitsuru is not sure how this should make her feel.
Protected? *Offended?*
All she knows is that, without his hand on hers, she feels cold and burning at the same time.

“Just… be careful, ok?”

Swallowing a mouthful of saliva, she nods. “Of course. I know what I’m doing, I promise.”

“People are talking about you guys, y’know. They say the asshole never cares about who he fucks, that he hurts people. And I don’t care if they drag Dazai through the mud, but you—” He stops. “I will fist fight them in the front yard for you.”

“Even the rugby team?” Mitsuru mutters, with a little smile. "Those guys are pretty scary."

Fujiwara grins right back.
For a beautiful, *flashing* moment, he beams as if he might still be in love with her.

“Especially the rugby team.”

So, if you ask Mitsuru, the plan is working.
Fujiwara's lips curl up as he looks at her with a newfound indulgence and allows the girl to change the subject. He's listening. He says he missed talking to her and, God, she almost believes him.
He's seeing her, really seeing her, for the first time in a long while.

But maybe it's backfiring, too, because a part of her can't ignore that she's been fixating on the night of the gig.
She remembers how Dazai acted.
She remembers the kiss Dazai refused, and one he obviously lied about.

'My first kiss was Chuuya.'

It obviously meant something. It was too somber, too heavy with longing. And, gosh, how at ease Chuuya seemed on Dazai's lap. How easily their bodies found each other, and how quickly they curled into each other's space.

Because Mitsuru was present when Chuuya started high school, and his first relationships had been with taller boys with brunet hair.

Chuuya never admitted he liked his 'Samu, no matter how painfully tender that crush seemed to everybody else. As for her, she had no right to corner her brother and ask about a childhood crush he always denied.
Truth be told, she always feared it would hit a nerve.

Besides, Osamu has only ever dated girls.

You know I...

It's impossible.

Micchan, can you leave us?

It's impossible, isn't it?

Chapter End Notes

> Next chapter is ✧protective Dazai✧ and a bitch will get punched

Chapter 5: A party, ruined

Chapter Summary

> Dazai, Chuuya and Mitsuru go to a party at Fujiwara's.
> Something goes terribly wrong — or, rather, right.

Chapter Notes

> Beautiful art of SKK here by the wonderful @criistill1 , here by the lovely and super talented Shimon and here and here from the super talented Nina! ❤

> Trigger Warnings:
> - Light mentions of self-harm
> - Violence
> - Blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai remembers the day Chuuya brought him flowers.

They had just finished math class, and the whole matter had been a *compromise*.
Read: Dazai accepted that Chuuya intended to get him flowers.

The execution, though, lacked finesse.

It's a winter morning, of the kind when snow-heavy clouds make the light milky, and the world is wrapped an ethereal mistiness.
Of that day, Dazai recalls two things: the snowflakes lazily starting to fall from the February sky, and Chuuya's red scarf covered in dirt. Soil dirties his hands, too, and a brown patch of fresh mud covers his right cheek.

He's wearing Fyodor's hat.

("Fedya lost a bet! I can wear his usbaka!"

"It's ushanka. *Chibi sure is illiterate."*

Chuuya looked at him and twisted his nose. "Ill…? Stop talking weird," he said.)

Most importantly, standing in front of Dazai's desk, Chuuya is handing him a pot of *gardenias.*

Dazai blinks, taking it in.
Thinking it must be a joke.
Soft white blossoms pepper the deep emerald of the foliage, like stains of color scattered by a lazy painter. The boy recognizes the gardenia flowers from Mori's garden, although the plant at home has since long overgrown its pot.

Though it's seen better days, it's a baby gardenia.

Now. *Question.*
Why in the world is Chuuya trying to gift him a potted plant during the ten-minute break between maths and calligraphy?

"What is that, Chibi?"

"Huh," Chuuya says, eyeing the pot in his hands. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No. Please, explain," Dazai replies, lowering the Ishiguro novel he's sneaked out of Mori's library.
Mori says he's too young for this kind of stuff, but Dazai doesn't give a damn about rules.
This one talks about child abductions, which Dazai doesn't find particularly stimulating as a nine-year-old himself, but the narrative is interesting.

He settles the book on his lap with a certain austerity, to make sure Chuuya knows that interrupting his reading for the shenanigans of a Chibikko is a big deal.

"Ha? Are you blind? I got you flowers."

Then, he gives the small terracotta pot a little shake as if to attract Dazai's attention to it. As he rattles the poor plant, dirt spills all over Chuuya's hands.
The plant is bigger than his face.

"You brought me a plant," Dazai corrects.

"Same difference."

"Wrong again. But, before we get into that, can Chuuya explain *why* did he get me flowers?"

“Huh… I saw it in a movie yesterday.” Chuuya scrunches his nose, as he always does when he tries to remember something. “If you have someone you appreciate, you give them flowers.”

“Yes,” Dazai says. His lips quirk into a cheerful smile. “You *do* give flowers to people. When they’re dead.”

“Ehhh?! No way!”

“I swear.”

“You’re lying!”

Dazai shrugs.
He toys with his book, absently folding the edge of a page. “Chibi wasted his time, huh?”

Still frowning, Chuuya seems to think it over for a second, gnawing at his bottom lip. Then he shoves the pot against Dazai’s chest, sprinkling dirt on the white shirt of his uniform.

“Whatever. I stole it already, so it’s yours.”

Dazai blinks, stunned.

His brain processes what the redhead has said.

It’s yours.

He—

“Wait… You’ve *stolen* it from where?” he asks, although he doesn’t have time for the answer.

Sagashina-sensei, the math teacher, is on them a minute later.
She’s hollering about a pot stolen from an older class' garden project, and about ‘Nakahara Chuuya being a little punk.’
Which would have been hilarious if Chuuya hadn’t grabbed Dazai’s hand and zoomed away. In a second, dropping the book *and* the vase, they're running out of the class.

Despite being an innocent bystander — a victim, to be precise — Dazai runs away and doesn’t question his choice for even a second. His sweaty palm stays glued to Chuuya’s hand, and refuses to let go.

Of it all, Dazai remembers the air burning his lungs as he blames his

criminal of a best friend.
He also remembers how Chuuya turned to grin at him, so quickly the brunet almost missed it when he blinked.

He tried his best to smile right back, tears burning his eyes and fatigue compressing his lungs.

They got caught, eventually.

When their parents got called in, elegantly crossing his legs, Verlaine insinuated that Sagashina-sensei should have worked harder on the class project's plants, anyway, before blaming kids.

"The basil is pale, and the roses are awful," he said. "I'll pay for the broken pot, *of course,* but I shall recommend you a good gardening book, sensei. You're in dire need of it."

Many years later, Dazai is not nine anymore.

He is sure he would have forgotten the so-called Gardenia Pot Accident, if Mori didn't like to remind him of it.

He lied to Chuuya, too, in that instance: people *do* gift flowers to their loved ones.
Dazai asked Mori what it meant, once at home.
He hoped his guardian could explain why Chuuya had brought him flowers; the man ruffled his hair and told him not to worry about it just yet. He'd understand in due time.

But many years have passed, yet Dazai still wonders why Chuuya thought of him, of all people.

He felt special, back then.

He felt happy.

As he picks a sober-looking bouquet of daisies and field flowers for Nakahara Mitsuru, because he *is* fully committed to their pantomime, Dazai wonders if he'll ever feel that happy again.

—

Chuuya fears very few things in life.
Meeting the infamous Oda Sakunosuke, the guy Dazai worships, for the first time is one of them.

In hindsight, he's regretting most of his life choices.
It's with the conscience that the night can go either spectacularly well or royally flop — and an upset stomach, because meeting Odasaku caused him enough anxiety that his body decided to riot against him — that Chuuya finds himself on Dazai's bed.

It's not a new occurrence.
He's spent many nights on the Mackerel's bed, eating crisps and watching movies. It wouldn't even be bad, if he weren't on top *of* Dazai, knees settled at both sides of the boy's hips, crunched over him and an open make-up bad tossed on the sheets.

Sitting literally on his crush's crotch is fraying Chuuya's patience, mind you. There's nothing entertaining in the way he's aware of Dazai under him, wearing grey sweatpants and a t-shirt and too many layers of bandages.

Now, several circumstances brought Chuuya with his makeup bag and his lanky idiot of a best friend sprawled under him.

Namely, it's Mitsuru's fault.

She invited them to a party. Which wouldn't be a bad thing, if Dazai hadn't cheerfully informed him that Odasaku was attending too, and proceeded to ask Chuuya to do his makeup. And Chuuya is a professional, right?
He did the makeup for many cinema stars and idols.
But Dazai... *damn.*
Dazai like this, with that goofy grin, soft hair spread on the pillow, and so close that Chuuya can almost sense his damp breath on his skin is a catastrophe begging to happen.
So Chuuya does what professionals do best: he focuses on what he can't stand about his current client.

Luckily for him, there's plenty he can't stand about Dazai.

"Stop blinking, damn it."

"I'm not!"

"I'll stab you with the brush if you don't stop— and don't squirm! What are you, a worm?"

"Chuuya is a slug. Squirming is more like his job," Dazai whines, blinking. Again. A-*fucking*-gain. At that moment, Chuuya decides he's not risking putting mascara on this idiot; he can go to the mirror and

do it himself.

“My job is to make you look presentable tonight, you ass.”

“Do you have to touch me, though? You’ll infect me with your slug slime!”

“Ha?! *You* asked me to do your makeup.”

As he talks, he grabs Dazai’s chin to angle his head, checking mainly that the highlighter matches on both sides.
He might have been particularly harsh with the movement, but he swears he feels the other shiver under him — and not in an unsexy, I-don't-like-it way.

“Ouch. Chuuya’s violent. And he’s sitting on my balls,” Dazai mumbles, in a growl that sounds more bratty than pained.

“You can handle it for five minutes. Can’t you, big boy?”

"No! Chuuya's crushing me. I'll die!"

"Do a backflip," Chuuya says, though he readjusts his weight to not hurt the other.

It’s a good thing that they are getting close again, he supposes. Yes, *even* if it involves sitting on Dazai’s balls — and entirely platonically, too.
Truth is, he missed Dazai.
He almost forgot what it meant to be in love with him, but the last months brought it all back full force.

“Chuuya?”

He shrugs the thought away, shaking his head.

“Sorry. I got distracted.” His fingers flicker through his makeup bag, finding a little sachet of liquid liners. “Eyeliner?”

“Yeah.”

“What color?”

“Black, obviously. Like my soul.”

Despite himself, Chuuya gifts him an unguarded smile. “You’re such an idiot.”

“And yet Chuuya loves me.”

At that, Chuuya almost chokes on his Adam’s apple.
If only Dazai had any idea.
He hesitates, balancing his words between what he wants and what it’s *safe*. “Shut up, shitty Dazai," he says, because it seems like a decent compromise.

He utters the insult as if to put distance between them — as if Dazai can be a different person from ‘Samu.

In response, Dazai leans forward. “Seriously, though. Do you still like me?”

“Bold of you to assume I ever liked you.”

"Fair enough. I don't like Chuuya either.”

They are just people who used to be close.

“Oi, Dazai, I’m gonna ask something.” Chuuya grimaces, toying with a black liquid liner. “You laugh, I jump on your stomach *and* your balls. Deal?”

“Ew. Deal.”

“Do you think your Odasaku will absolutely detest me?”

As if someone has flipped a switch, Dazai’s expression turns serious. Slowly, he raises a hand. He’s not grinning anymore, though his cheeks are softened by the shadow of two dimples; it’s a tender smile, this time, with no trace of mockery or cruelty.
He flicks one strand away from Chuuya’s forehead. There’s such sweetness in his gesture that — and here's an interesting contrast — the gentleness round-kicks all the air out of Chuuya’s lungs.

“He will like you,” the brunet assures. It's a little shy of a whisper.

“What if he hates me, and questions why we ever became friends in the first place?"

“He won’t. You’re *my* Chuuya, after all.”

The name is meant to be a contrast with *Dazai’s* Odasaku, but it somehow feels more intimate.

“Hm.”

“Chuuya, I’m serious. Odasaku heard all about the kid who stole a pot of flowers and got me almost suspended because of it.” Chuuya’s jaw slacks, but Dazai carries on to avoid an interruption he’s already predicted. “He heard about my first kiss. He heard about that time you broke my Gameboy, and the time you cried because I killed your Tamagotchi. I’m sorry, by the way.”

“Right, you're not. Does he know you cheat at Mario Kart?”

Dazai waves the comment away. “Allegedly.”

“Allegedly my ass, you jerk.”

“Chuuya’s just a sore loser. *And,* yeah, Odasaku knows you’re a sore loser.”

The other flashes him a cheeky grin and, somehow, Chuuya can’t but smile back. *Even* if Dazai is a dirty cheater and starved poor cat Tamagotchi on purpose, may it rest in peace.

“You said you told Oda about the kiss,” he starts, trying to make it sound casual. Ignoring how Dazai stiffens under him. “Funny. I thought you regretted it.”

“What?”

“I overheard you and Mitsuru talk. Saying that you wouldn’t do it again.”

Dazai sighs.

“That *is* true,” he says, with that tone of when he’s measuring every word to avoid hurting others. It always hurts Chuuya either way, but that’s on him; he cares too much. “I regret that our first kiss ended up in us parting ways.” A moment. Another sigh, deeper this time. “I stole your first kiss and made it into a dumb, childish thing when you could have had something meaningful.”

“Dazai,” he murmurs. “You were my best friend.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“It *was* meaningful.”

“Yet it didn’t mean enough to stay in touch, both of us.” As he says it, Dazai offers him a weak smile, as if he didn’t just slap Chuuya across the face with a sentence. Because it’s true, and there’s no amount of

regret that can change the past. “Is Chuuya going to use that eyeliner, or…?”

As he clicks his tongue, Chuuya is grateful for the change of topic.

At least, he can focus on how his eyeliner rolls above Dazai’s lid, leaving behind a thick trace of black ink, and not on how they wasted so many years chasing ghosts.

—

Fujiwara’s villa is an enormous flaunt of wealth and (tasteless) western modern architecture, as you’d expect from a rich jock with more square meters of in-house gym than brain cells.

Besides, Dazai knew from the moment Mitsuru defined the party ‘a gathering for a few friends’ that Fujiwara was going to invite half of their university.
He's a show-off like that.

As it happens, he would have preferred to take a romantic bubble bath with a toaster rather than enter Fujiwara *Himbo* Teika’s lair, because you never know if stupidity is a transmissible disease, but Mitsuru forced him to attend.
They have to show up at things for *real* to make the *fake* dating believable.

At least the alcohol is free and the nibbles are decent.

At least, when he heard Odasaku was going to be at the party, Dazai figured it would be a great way to introduce his best friend and Chuuya.

Well.

That was the plan, but Fujiwara and Mitsuru whisked the Chibi away, leaving Dazai to sulk in a corner.

“This is Chuuya,” Mitsuru is saying. “For those of you who don’t know, he’s my little brother,” she adds, draping an arm around Chuuya’s shoulders. “He’s studying fashion marketing. *And* he’s Dazai’s roommate.”

Politely, Chuuya bows. “It’s nice to meet you."

So *polished.*

He almost seems soft-spoken, which makes Dazai roll his eyes. He knows what Chuuya's true self looks like when no one is around: loud and crude.

"Oh! You live with Mitsuru's boyfriend?"

"How *is* Dazai-san at home?"

"You look exactly like Micchan! How cute."

"Ehh?!"

At a safe distance, Dazai seethes in silence.
He lifts a hand and, absently, his teeth find his thumb, closing around it, scraping the skin and the nail. He *gnaws* at it.

Side by side, Chuuya and Mitsuru are obviously related, yet one can see Paul and Arthur's influence.
It's the *differences,* though, that capture Dazai's attention.

Chuuya's shorter, more muscular yet lean.
Mitsuru's tall, and her undertones are so much warmer than Chuuya's cold reds and cerulean blues. Her white dress looks preppy next to Chuuya's *Metallica* shirt — which is tucked in high-waisted black jeans, because of course everybody needs to notice Chuuya's ass.

"Yep," Mitsuru is saying. "And he's adorable, smart, and hot as hell."

"It runs in the family," Fujiwara says, with a shrug.

Dazai will pretend he didn't hear that. In fact, he agrees.
He has another problem, right now, because a murmured 'we see that!' from a couple of girls in the group makes him question if a lifetime in prison is worth the thirty-second-long satisfaction of lynching them.

"Oi, Mitsuru…" Chuuya growls. He blushed to the tip of his ears.

"Ah! He's also single, so I will be taking marriage proposals."

"Can you not?!"

"Micchan, leave him alone," Fujiwara says. Through the crowd, Dazai can detect his subtle smile.

"I'm joking~! Seriously, though, treat him right, guys. Or I'll kill you."

Dazai munches on his nail.
Whatever dating offer Chuuya gets, he will have to *stop* them.
There's no way Chuuya can date one of these idiots, especially not one of Fujiwara's friends. He's so preoccupied with mentally hexing the group, that he doesn't even *hear* the clicking of high heels approaching him.

"Here you are."

Ah, he thinks, though he doesn't move. At last, someone he likes.
"Hello, Akiko."

"You don't have to murder anyone with that glare, grumpy boy," the girl says, digging her elbow into his ribs. "You drinking with us or what?"

"I'm *busy."*

"Come on," she nudges. "Ango got some imported tequila. Stop staring at your girlfriend and have some fun."

"I'm not *staring."*

"Then move. Mitsuru will join us when she's done with her brother."

Begrudgingly, mumbling that Mitsuru doesn't *have* to join them, Dazai peels his gaze away from the group.

He might end up accidentally spilling that it's not Mitsuru he's pining after, if he doesn't take care. Even worse, Yosano is smart. It would take her three seconds to put two and two together and realize who is *truly* siphoning all his attention.
Drowning in a glass of whisky — or twenty — sounds better than eternal humiliation.

—

When Odasaku sits next to him, Chuuya nearly has a heart attack.

Part of him is sure that the quiet, unreadable expression of the man — his deep blue eyes, the thin line of his mouth — will cause him an aneurysm if he keeps trying to read it.

Oda Sakunosuke is a *tranquil* soul, the personification of an uplifting story you know you'll love.
Which is ironic if one considers that Dazai is the most restless person

on the planet, though Chuuya supposes the two of them complete each other. Oda's emotions are difficult to dole out, too, but he likely doesn't conceal the pits of darkness that Dazai hides behind a cheerful façade.

Yet, around him, Chuuya can't relax. He barely talked at all when Dazai introduced them and he can barely function *now.* How can Oda appear so unfazed, sharing a couch like they are not best friends by proxy?
His right leg starts bouncing.
He better not screw this up, he tells himself. Dazai will hate him, in the unfortunate occurrence of Oda hating him.

No pressure.

"Dazai talked about you, ya know," he starts, to fill the silence. "He said you recommended him for the Ph.D."

"I did. He's a smart guy."

"Unfortunately," Chuuya agrees, taking a sip of wine. "People back home used to say he's a genius."

With a pensive sound, Oda drops his head to the side. "Some of our professors agree. And, personally, I wouldn't rule it out."

"I hope he's not, though. That idiot doesn't need more reasons to feel like an outsider." Honestly? He'd rather Dazai was a little less smart and a little happier. "Oda-san, is it?"

"Just Oda is fine."

"Thanks for looking after him. I know it's a shitty job."

"It's not that bad," Oda says. "Dazai talked about you, too."

Here goes nothing, Chuuya thinks. "He blabbed, ha? What did he say?"

"That you guys used to be friends."

The choice of words causes irritation to crawl up Chuuya's neck, making his hair stand on his nape. He has to open and stretch the fingers of his free hand not to clench them into a fist.
Used to.
Inhaling, Chuuya tells himself that being defensive won't help him. There's nothing wrong with the truth — dry, hard facts.

Shitty facts that suck.

Still, he chugs down the entire wine glass to balance out the bitter taste of those words.

“Yeah. Well, we used to be in the same school, and now we live together. Guess life is funny.”

“Life *is* funny. How was Dazai as a kid?”

“An absolute nuisance,” Chuuya replies, without losing a beat. “He sucked. He still does. I thought he’d improve, but he still puts cereals before milk and only sleeps on his right side. And he holds his chopsticks way too close to the tip.”

“Does he?” Odasaku asks. “I never noticed.”

“I did,” Chuuya says. He notices a *bazillion* things about Dazai every day and archives them in a specific folder of his mind. “He never shuts up even if you jam food down his throat but, if you listen closely, it’s a lot of noise for someone who never complains or opens up for real.” A sigh “Damn him. He still makes me worry.”

I will marry ‘Samu, echoes in his mind.
And look at them *now*.
Oda asked about Dazai as a child, and he’s rambling.

“Like,” Chuuya says before he can stop himself. “I mean, what’s the deal with the stupid bandages? Sometimes I wonder if the kid I knew is somewhere under them. Because, most days, I can’t fucking find him.”

Oda glances at him. “Is he so different?”

“Mad different. But it doesn’t matter, I guess, because he seems happy now.” Mid-sentence, Chuuya realizes it’s *half* a lie; he hates Mitsuru for stealing his crush but, as long as Dazai is happy, he will lurk on the sidelines to protect that fleeting happiness.
He waits for Oda to let out an encouraging hmm before continuing. “I guess… it's so stupid, ya know? He’s an annoying son of a bitch, but he—" Chuuya pauses, and the words he was trying to let out remain in his lungs. They cut the tender skin like shards of glass. “But he’s still a good person. He’s just too dumb to notice.”

“I see.”

“So, yeah. He changed. We both did,” he murmurs, grateful for having downed only *one* glass of wine.
If he were drunker, he’d probably spill that Dazai is also that old war scar he’ll never heal from, that will always hurt.

For a moment, Oda’s eyes fix on him. His lips twist.

“I must say, you are not what I expected, Chuuya-kun.”

Cool.
He’s officially been labeled as a weirdo.

“Sorry. Did I say something weird?” he asks as if he didn’t just vomit on a stranger a five-minute TED Talk on Dazai.

And there’s still so much he’d like to say: how the kid used to smile, how his skin used to feel without the bandages. How he used to fight with Fyodor for Chuuya’s attention.

“Not at all.”

“I’m asking because you’re *looking* at me like I’m the entire circus.”

“Sorry, Chuuya-kun, that wasn't my intention at all. I just never heard anyone talk about Dazai in such terms.”

“You never heard somebody call him an annoying son of a whore?” Chuuya cackles. “Because I call bullshit.”

“No. I never met someone who understood him.” A shiver runs down Chuuya’s spine, though he tells himself it means nothing. It doesn’t mean Oda saw right through him. It doesn’t— “You’re in love with him.”

Ah.

Shit.

Chuuya’s blood freezes.

It took him exactly three minutes to be called out and to ruin any chances of friendship with someone who knows both Dazai and Mitsuru.
Yay him. Maybe he won a shitty prize or something; best clown of the party.
Sounds like him.

Chuuya clings to his empty drink as if squeezing the plastic could teleport him somewhere else; possibly somewhere he can die and never be found again. “I—“

“You don’t have to justify it. I won’t tell,” Oda says. Chuuya can hear him musing. “I’m relieved, actually.”

He furrows his brow. “Relieved?”

Well, that makes one of them, because Chuuya is the *opposite* of relieved.

“Yes. Dazai is more serene when you’re around.”

“Because *I* am the stressed one when *he’s* around.”

Oda lets out a short chuckle. “I sometimes don’t understand him, but thank you for making Dazai happy.”

Chuuya doesn’t know what to do with that praise. He’s not sure he passed the test — and, now, he’s not sure there was ever a test in the first place.
He offers Oda a tiny, timid smile in return.

“You’re welcome,” he says.

He’s the one who makes me happy, he means.

—

It’s almost midnight, and Mitsuru supposes the evening is not going too badly. Cinderella can say she’s satisfied and waiting for the prince to pick up her *shoe.*
Dazai is flirting with a cute brunette in the billiard room — when is he *not?* And Haruno-chan is his type, anyway —, Chuuya has been talking animatedly with Odasaku and she’s the perfect wallflower.

She’s *waiting.* She knows one can’t rush destiny.
And—

“I hope you’re enjoying the party.”

—And, would you look at that? It seems like her prince decided to pick up the glass shoe, at last.
It just took three beers and way too many hours pretending she cares about politics, music, and small talk, but her efforts paid off.

Plastering the most inviting smile on her face, Mitsuru looks at Fujiwara as if she didn't mind waiting for him all night long.

"It's not too bad. Chuuya's having fun."

"I saw him talking to Oda," Fujiwara agrees, throwing a thumb over his shoulder to point at the sofa. "Has your so-called boyfriend asked you to dance even once?"

Mitsuru shakes her head. "He's busy, I guess."

Fujiwara twists his lips.

"Bastard," he says, and a vein in his neck visibly bulges. Though, his gaze softens when he smiles at her. "Do you *want* to dance?"

With a small skip of her heart, Mitsuru thinks it's convenient that Dazai doesn't care about his reputation, and what people hate him for. Lucky, even. It would be a pity if Fujiwara knew her so-called boyfriend neglected her on purpose to leave space for him.
The lack of attention has been bait all along.

She smiles back and accepts the boy's hand, her fingers resting on his palm.

"Yeah," she says. "Thanks."

—

"Do you dance?"

Chuuya's first thought is: *fucking finally*.

He doesn't know the boy who talked to him, but he immediately clocks in with the fact that the stranger is pretty.
Short brown hair frame his round face, and narrow shoulders balance out a petite body. He's not even that *much* taller than Chuuya, either, which must be a first. He's not Chuuya's usual type, but the blush coloring his face tugs at the redhead's heart.

He might dance with Shy Guy once, just for fun.

Then he might text the Flags, who are still convinced the last person Chuuya casually slept with was Fedya.
(It wasn't, but he was still the *best* casual sex he ever had.)

However, the moment Chuuya stands up and flashes the boy a smile, a firm hand lands on his shoulder.
Then, a puff of breath ghosts over his ear.

“Sorry, Kobayashi-san. I’m afraid the Chibi’s taken for this song.”

The boy’s eyes widen as he backtracks, and Chuuya wants to *die.*
It has to be a nightmare.

“A— I’m sorry, Dazai-San! I didn’t know!”

“It’s all good~”

“Sorry!”

Kobayashi bows, and— yep. *Definitely* a nightmare.
He's having a bad trip, because Dazai is stealing him away like a shitty parcel and Chuuya refuses to believe it's happening for real.

“No worries. I’m stealing Chuuya, now! Bye-bye~”

“I’m *free?”* the redhead says, loud enough for the stranger — Kobayashi, was it? — to hear.

“No, you’re not,” Dazai retorts, chipper, dragging him away.

The only thing Chuuya can do is follow Dazai like a sheep, even if the *bastard* is guiding him in the opposite direction of a possible one-night stand while blabbering nonsense. His cheerful tone melts into sheer annoyance as soon as they are out of Kobayashi's range, and his smile *withers*.

“Ugh. That was annoying."

"That's my line, you idiot! What the hell?!"

"Chuuya is making me do all the legwork.”

“Ha?!”

“I'm protecting you, of course. Kobayashi is not good for you.”

“Says *you.* Why are you here, anyway?”

“I was having fun with *my* friends, for your information, but I took pity on a dumb slug,” Dazai says, with a shrug. “I can’t believe Chuuya’s not talking to anyone.”

Chuuya scoffs. “Yeah, and whose fault is that?”

Still, he allows Dazai to lead him through the room, too focused on the boy’s hand around his wrist to mind how they keep bumping into half-tipsy strangers.

Dazai throws a glance behind his shoulder and blinks at him. Damn him, he seems *genuinely* puzzled. “Do you *like* Kobayashi?”

“Well…maybe? I don’t know him.”

Thanks to Dazai, he won’t know him ever.
And it’s not like he was planning on asking for his biography, just to hang out for a drink and maybe a blowjob. Dazai doesn't need to talk as if Chuuya was planning a marriage with the guy; it's just sex. It's not that deep.

“You can find someone better.”

“And I guess we'll never know if your protective ass keeps ruining it for me.”

“It’s just— Kobayashi is not worth your time." A pause. Then, Dazai lets go of him. They reached the table with the drinks, Chuuya notices, and the brunet already stepped away to grab two cups. Damn, it was *fast.* "Actually, everybody here is kind of lame, aside from Odasaku, who is obviously a no-dating zone, and your sister. Besides, I’m Chuuya’s best friend.”

“Yes, and…?”

"I must approve of your suitors," Dazai says, with a slight tilt of his head.

The movement causes the dark locks of his fringe to bounce, and Chuuya has to clasp the ledge of his shirt not to brush the hair away from the boy’s forehead. After all, he supposes that the joke's on him: bickering and drinking with Dazai is a hundred times better than hooking up with a random stranger.
He's *that* desperate.
When Dazai offers him a plastic cup filled to the brim with red wine, Chuuya accepts it quietly. It's a sin to serve wine in plastic, but he'll let it slide for tonight.

"My *what?* What are you, a Bridgerton's cousin?"

"Ah, funny. I just have to make sure Chuuya's flirting with the right people."

“No, you don’t.”

“What if they’re awful?”

“Who cares? I don’t need to marry them, idiot.”

“And what if they stab you in an alley, then?” He says, ignoring how Chuuya lifts his eyes to the ceiling. “Come on, you should thank me. I’m, like, the beta-reader of your boy choices.”

“Please, don't make me retch. And you sound like Albatross, with the difference that I *trust* Albatross,” Chuuya groans. There’s a laugh lingering in his voice, though. “And what do these poor souls have to do to be approved by your highness of the Mackerels, anyway?”

Dazai grins.

“Well…” he starts, lifting his own cup to his lips.
He’s just about to speak, toying with the pause, when they are joined by Oda and a girl with a butterfly pin in her hair that Dazai introduces as Yosano Akiko.

Chuuya will never know what people have to do to pass Dazai’s test, but he’s not *sure* he wants to investigate.

—

“Oh, Dazai. The man of the moment.”

In part, Chuuya blames himself for this whole mess. It’s his fault for lowering his guard.

The first thing he recognizes in the guy who approached them is that he’s *hammered.* He’s slurring his words and dragging his feet. His silk shirt reeks of tequila, that imported bottle Ango bought from a recent trip on the other side of the world.
Even his dyed, blonde hair seems soaked in the stench of liquor and cheap cigarette smoke.

The guy wobbles in their direction, his eyes fixed on Dazai.
And under all that — under his unsteady steps and lopsided smirk —

he looks *sad,* that kind of barbed pain that alcohol tends to set free. It's the kind of pain that makes people stupid, the kind that ingites fights.

A bad feeling trickles down Chuuya's spine as he realizes how Dazai's body tenses.

"Ah— Riichi-kun. Hello." Then, to Chuuya, "Chibi, this is Ueno Riichi, from the journalism department. His girlfriend Tomie is a friend in common."

"Ex-girlfriend," the man hisses.

Dazai tilts his head. "My apologies."

"Don't talk like you're not gloating." Huh-uh. He seems pissed about it, Chuuya considers, closing ranks by Dazai's side. Knowing Dazai and his bad habits when it comes to girls, he might have played a part in that. "How have you been? I heard Professor Kajii handed you your ass in the last exam. It was *shameful."*

"He did. Not my best moment."

Although Dazai has taken the blow gracefully, Chuuya grimaces at the jab.
He remembers how Dazai was rolling on the couch, calling himself useless as if a bad grade defined him as a person. He bets his makeup collection that name-dropping Dazai's most recent failure wasn't a coincidence.
Now, he doesn't know this Riichi, but it's starting to become obvious Dazai pissed him off.
And, if Dazai's actions diminished him, the redhead is not surprised that the guy is going for the same tactic. It's *natural,* even.

"What happened, Dazai? Got distracted? Too busy fucking other people's girlfriends?"

Instantly, Chuuya bares his teeth.
Yeah, no. Natural and understandable, he said? Scratch that. He'll kick this asshole's gums into his skull.

"You got a problem, jerk?"

"Several." Riichi's lips curl up. "Piss off. Who are you, anyway?"

"The one who will punch you a brand new face if you don't shut up,"

Chuuya snarls.

“Leave him alone, Riichi.”

“Or *what?”*

“Come on, Dazai,” Chuuya says, a tinge of annoyance in his voice. “It’s not worth the bother.”

As his fingers wrap around the brunet's wrist and he tries to tug him away, Chuuya’s eyes search for Mitsuru in the crowd — hoping she can help smooth down the fight boiling under the surface. He's not sure he'll be able to stop Dazai because, frankly, the guy deserves a smack.
He should have expected Dazai was going to shake away his hand, though. The guy is *begging* for a fight.

“People talk about you, asshole. They say you’re a genius,” Riichi is saying.

"I guess.”

"Tomie thought so too."

Dazai tilts his chin a little higher.
The way he tucks his hands in the pockets of his dark slacks drips smugness; his relaxed, nonchalant attitude makes people feel dumb just by having Dazai *look* at them. “You have a different opinion, it seems.”

The man sneers. Yellow-ish, nicotine-stained teeth flash under the strobe lights, but there’s no joy in his irises.

“Not only me. Everybody knows that, if your *dear* Oda hadn’t recommended you, you’d be out.”

“Dazai,” Chuuya mumbles, trying to safe-word to the other with his eyes.
Again, he’s ignored.

"Who did you fuck to get that Ph.D.? Was it Oda?”

Dazai’s eyes narrow. His voice rings stern, stripped bare of the fake cheerfulness from before. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Why? Touched a nerve, Dazai?”

People are starting to stare at the exchange, attracted by the buzzing air and the rising voices.
Riichi's laughter covers the music, joyless — it sounds like walking on glass, like nails down a chalkboard. "So, whose cock have you sucked to get so far up the ranks, huh?"

"Why," Dazai drawls. He's taller, and God knows Dazai can use his height to make others feel *tiny*. "Not everybody needs that kind of subterfuge. Though you sound awfully familiar with it. Did you try to sleep your way up and it *still* wasn't enough? Did your girlfriend find out?"

"You know what happened."

"No, I don't."

"Tomie, she did— you *bastard*, she…" Riichi's voice trails off in a shiver. "She—"

"A word of advice," Dazai interrupts him, leveled. He takes a step forward.
From the timbre of his voice, gentle and abrasive, like sweet acid dripping on flesh, Chuuya already knows Dazai's words are shot to maim and humiliate. Then, kill.
Yet, somehow, he sounds so hypnotic that one can't but listen. "You need to be half decent in bed if you want to trade sex for power." A smirk. "From what Tomie-*chan* told me, it's not your case."

That's what makes Riichi snap.

That's his *switch,* Dazai would say, and Chuuya is sure the boy will relish having pushed the right buttons to turn an angry asshole into a violent one, later. He'll even laugh it off, later.
For now, though, the redhead stares as Riichi lurches forward, launching himself at Dazai.
He lets out a full-lung, hollow battle cry, and he aims, and he *hits*.

He charges the punch, but it's slowed down by all the drinking.

Although barely, Dazai side-steps it.
He's not as lucky with the second punch, though: the brunet is fast, but he's tipsy and not prepared for a fight. Riichi's hand collides against Dazai's forearm with a muffled sound.

"Pity," Dazai still hums, stepping out of the other's reach without any visible reaction. His hooded smile remains unscathed. "Seems like

you're not very good at *this* either."

"Fuck you," Riichi spits. He charges again. Again, he fails. His steps thunder in the room as he runs in the brunet's direction, but Dazai waltzes out of the trajectory with no effort, his smile untouched and his hands still in his pockets.
One might believe it's not the first brawl he's facing, and Chuuya inwardly damns him.

"You think you're smart," Riichi is saying, panting.

"No, no." A cruel edge trills in Dazai's voice. "I just think *you* are not particularly bright."

"Shut up!"

"Though I see why Tomie-chan was dissatisfied with a violent jerk."

"*Shut up*."

Dazai is *taunting* Riichi, swiftly moving away every time the man straightens up and attempts to tackle him.

Looking around, assessing with a tinge of relief that the crowd is more excited than worried, Chuuya tells himself he should stay out of it. It's the smart thing to do. And he *wants* to, until he notices how Riichi moves to the nearby table, grabbing the first thing he can turn into a weapon.

His shaky hand blindly closes around the brown neck of the bottle. Reddened, bony fingers clutch dark, cold glass.

It's just a second, just enough time for an alarm to go off in Chuuya's brain.

A beer bottle.

In a blink, the odds shift.
Some people can't win unless the game is rigged. A muffled gasp spreads through the audience like a wave. They observe with open mouths and greedy eyes as if it's nothing but a *play,* a violent game - someone hurt, and someone smart. Someone will end up bleeding, but they don't care.
It's not real, for them.
It's just *entertainment.*

But the way Riichi swings the bottle mid-air, his hissing breath turning heavy, is everything but fake.
Not so smug anymore, bastard? he's saying, speaking around a grin and through the haze of the alcohol. *You don't think you can do as you please with Tomie anymore, ha?*

Chuuya doesn't tune in with the threats, though.
He takes in how Dazai blinks, lips parting in surprise — in that flash of surprise, barely visible, Chuuya reads the conscience that an otherwise entertaining fistfight just got *ugly*.

It's fast.

Too fast.

And—

"Oi. Asshole."

Chuuya acts *faster*.

When he moves and grabs Riichi's shoulder, hooking his fingers into the man's shirt to force him to turn, he blames it on that dipshit Dazai. He blames it on his attitude, on how he flirts with problems. He blames it on that loyalty that links them and runs deeper than water, thicker than blood.

Alcohol plays a part.
He's *sure* that his feelings do too, because Chuuya wouldn't step forward, throw back his true arm and swing a punch at just anyone.

But he does, and he steps forward and he sees *red* as his knuckles collide with Riichi's nose.

It's not a full-force hook, but it's *enough*.

White pain shoots up Chuuya's arm, making it come alive with tingles.

The deaf crack ricochets in his head. It's a noise that reminds him of an egg breaking, of branches snapping in winter. Pain explodes up his phalanges, as a splash of blood spills on the man's face.
Ruby red against blotched skin. Bewilderment flashes across the other's eyes, and Chuuya wonders why he can't stop *grinning*.

Riichi's grip on the bottle's neck slips, and the glass shatters to the

ground.
The howl blooms from his chest first, though it breaks as his hand covers his broken nose. It starts as a surprised wheeze (“*ah-a-a,”* stuttered, a sound torn to pieces in the man’s windpipe), but it swells with the passing seconds.
It rises, and his eyes widen, and horror tinges his face.

Chuuya ignores it all.

“Let’s go, ‘Samu,” he hears himself saying, grabbing Dazai’s wrist.

He’s not sure if it’s the right thing to say, though, because Dazai’s pulse hiccups under his fingers as he shoulders his way past the people.

His knuckles burn, bruised. His palm prickles.

His blood sings.

Riichi’s heavy, broken wheeze still echoes in his mind.

The punch was supposed to sober him up.
Instead, he feels higher than he’s ever been in his life.

—

Five minutes later, he’s shepherded Dazai away from the crowd.

They’re standing in somebody’s bedroom. Chuuya forgot whom. He’s not sure he even asked Mitsuru whose house this is, whose party.

Now, the details lost their meaning.

He is standing in front of Dazai, his hand throbbing painfully as he keeps it close to his chest, trying to assess how much damage Riichi's words caused.

“That’s a bunch of bullshit.”

Dazai doesn’t reply.
He retreated behind a wall, a mask of perfect stillness that Chuuya can’t read. He *hates* it.

“You don’t believe that guy, right?”

“Chuuya hurt himself.”

It's not an answer.

"This is nothing. You, though. Please don't tell me you believe that stuff about sleeping your way up the ranks and shit."

"…"

"You deserve your accomplishments, Dazai."

"Give me your hand."

Again, not an answer.

This time though, before he can reply that it's nothing he hasn't done before, Chuuya watches as Dazai unravels a long string of gauze that was covering his wrist.
The skin under the bandage is pale, crossed by ragged ghosts of alabastrine scar tissue.
Chuuya inhales. Round marks of ancient cigarette sears pepper the skin, almost translucent in the light before Dazai unrolls his sleeve back all the way to his wrist.

It makes Chuuya dread what else lies under the bandages.
What marks of aching humanity is Dazai hiding from him?

"Dazai—"

"Stop being loud, slug. I know my name." Dazai interrupts, but it sounds far away. "Show me your knuckles."

Without a word, Chuuya obeys.

He follows, mesmerized, as Dazai's wraps the bandages around his knuckles, crossing the gauze over his palm.
It's tight, the fabric biting the flash and digging in it, but the bandage is still warm from being against Dazai's skin.

Silently, lifting his free hand, Chuuya runs his fingers over Dazai's chest.
There's still a kid, under Dazai's armor. A damaged, pained kid.
And maybe violence calls for other violence but, if he could, he'd rip Dazai's rib cage open.
He'd steal that heartbeat, tearing his own chest apart so both hearts can live together.

His thumb skims over the slender column of the other's collarbone,

traveling down to the sternum.

“Don’t believe a word of that bullshit,” he says. He’s *pleading.*

“I don’t. Punching him was dumb,” Dazai murmurs.

“Was it?” He asks, rough. Distant. “Felt deserved to me.”

“I didn't say he didn't deserve it,” Dazai says. “He was getting on my nerves.”

The colorless tone of the comment makes Chuuya scoff — because he knows. He *noticed.* “Yeah. I saw that.”

“But you didn’t have to get yourself involved.”

“Of course I had to.”

“I was handling it.”

“You were *dragging* it. I finished a shitty fight, and it’s *fine.* We’ve got each other, don’t we?”

“…Yeah, we do,” Dazai whispers, his forehead brushing against Chuuya’s.

He’s been curving into Dazai’s space, breathing in the faint smell of alcohol, almost tasting the leftover trace of makeup on Dazai’s lips.

Heart beating around his throat, Chuuya swallows.
Maybe it’s the drinks and maybe it’s the punch, maybe it’s the adrenaline or maybe they just contained the inevitable for too damn long, but he can’t breathe when he is not touching Dazai.

His good hand slips down and closes on the front of Dazai’s shirt, clutching the fabric, but the other hand— *god.*

Dazai interlaces their fingers together, his bare skin kissing Chuuya’s bandaged palm.

But there’s no ‘us’, Chuuya thinks, dazed; *no way.*

But.

What if.

Dazai bends over him first, but they meet halfway.

Oh, Chuuya thinks, *maybe there is an 'us' after all. Maybe* this *is us.*

Dazai's lips are rough yet *soft,* his tongue demanding as it encourages Chuuya to open his mouth for him. The way he cups Chuuya's neck with both hands makes the redhead's heart hiccup and his guts dip. It's a kiss, and it's happening, and Dazai lets out a low growl as their noses bump one against the other.

Chuuya is sure he'll regret it.

Tomorrow.

Later.

He tells himself it's the same kind of kiss he shares with Albatross, but there is nothing *amicable* in the way Dazai opens his mouth to eat him up. If Chuuya has to trust his guts, he'd say it's mad *love.* Because there's nothing friendly in the way the brunet guides him a couple of steps back and pins him to the wall, elbows framing his head as Chuuya throws his arms around Dazai's neck to tug him closer. Dazai's hands find their way to his jeans, groping his ass.

The kiss is *fast* and deep. It's sloppy, and it mixes the cocktails Dazai has been chugging down with the aftertaste of wine lingering in Chuuya's mouth.

For a moment, Dazai trails dry kisses down his face, all the way from the corner of his bottom lip to his chin. The gesture, the quickness of it before Dazai reclaims his mouth makes Chuuya's stomach fold. It makes him *moan.*
Dazai searches him like a man starving, like he's been waiting all his life.
In retaliation Chuuya pulls at Dazai's hair, pressing his fingers into his scalp to keep him close, to kiss him better.

He's drunk.

Oh, God. He has a sister.

Dazai has a *girlfriend.*

Chuuya is pretty sure there's a circle of hell for people like them.

(Why does it reassure him that, whatever postcode of hell he ends up to, he'll be with Dazai?)

“Wait,” he mutters, pushing away.

“Chuuya, you just broke somebody’s nose for me,” Dazai growls, huskily, cupping his face and kissing him again.
He says it like Chuuya made it impossible for him to resist the temptation.

“Yeah, Mackerel. I was there.”

“And how *else* am I supposed to react?”

“Sadist,” Chuuya growls, halfway between a grin and a sigh.

In place of an answer, Dazai murmurs a ‘god’ that sounds dangerously on the fence between a ‘what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you’ and a wail, and kisses him again. It makes Chuuya thaw like spring snow under the sun.
If Dazai’s smiles reminded him of summer — all soft dimples and mellow light — his kisses are scorching heat.

Him going full Fight Club on a stranger *did* turn Dazai on, as Chuuya can easily understand from the friction between their bodies. Sandwiched between the brunet’s body and the wall, grinding against him, his head is spinning.

“It wasn’t that special.”

The laughter Dazai lets out is choked, almost pained. And Chuuya finds there’s something *stormy* in how Dazai is chuckling against his mouth, thumb skimming over his jaw.

“Are you joking, Chuuya? It reminded me exactly why I—“

A knock makes them both flinch.

They jump away from each other, putting some much-needed distance the moment the door opens.

It gives them exactly five seconds — five seconds he would have gladly spent kissing Dazai, and not standing under Odasaku’s gaze.

“Uh, sorry, did I interrupt?“ Oda says, peeking from behind the ajar door. It’s obvious he did, though he doesn’t seem surprised nor intend to address what he saw. Perhaps, Chuuya considers, he’s too tired and drunk to care. Perhaps, when he said ‘I won’t judge’, he meant it. “You were taking a while.”

“Ah. Chuuya’s hand was injured."

“I’m fine,” Chuuya says, with a shrug. “What’s up?”

“Party’s over before Fujiwara calls the police on us for spilling blood on his father’s carpet. I’m driving you both home,” Odasaku says, flashing a glance at Dazai. “You ok?”

Dazai nods, neck rigid while he forcefully glances away from Chuuya. “I’m good. Just a little sore.” Although he tilts his head ever so subtly, his eyes still avoid Chuuya’s face. “Do you mind if I stay at Odasaku’s, Chuuya? I need to sober up.”

A loud ‘yes’ and ‘no’ flash in Chuuya’s mind at the same time.
He’s not sure he can sign up for a night alone. God knows what stupid shit he might do.
On another hand, if he’s not sure he can handle himself, he’s even *less* sure he would be able to handle the night in the same house as Dazai.

“No,” he murmurs. “Of course.”

“Well, it’s good to know in advance you’re staying at mine,” Oda says, though his tone is lighthearted. Someone might say he finds them cute. “You can go with Ango, then. He’s staying over too. I’m still driving you, Chuuya.”

“Ah, it’s not necessary! I can call a cab.”

“No can do. You’re not going in a cab alone and drunk, and your sister is staying behind to deal with Fujiwara.” Oda lets out a soft puff, crossing his arms to his chest. “Nice punch, back there.”

Sheepishly, Chuuya rubs his neck. “Thanks,” he mumbles.

Odasaku will love you, Dazai promised. What a scam.
Now he knows Dazai was right, and that he likes Oda right back, too. The guy is good for Dazai, and Chuuya managed to not mess up their first meeting.

Too bad he fucked up everything else.

He still holds Dazai back before the boy can march out of the room, grabbing his sleeve.

“Hey. Are we good?”

Dazai squeezes his hand.

“We’re good,” he says. “Of course.”

“Are you going to be ok? About the things that asshole said, and—this.”

He still can’t bring himself to tackle what happened, but there’s something in the way Dazai’s eyes gleam in the light — in the way his touch lingers on Chuuya’s skin, how their fingers hook around each other — that soothes his worries.
They might have messed up, but they messed up together.

“I need some sleep, that's all. Tomorrow, we will regroup and see what to do. Are you ok?”

Chuuya nods gingerly. “Yeah. I think I am.”

“We’ll do the right thing.” Dazai gives him a brittle smile. “I promise.”

“Why do I sense a but…?”

“But we’re not in our right minds now, and I need some sleep before class. And you have a casting call at seven if I’m not mistaken.”

“Oh, shit.”

Damn.
How could he forget? And he'll have to deal with a bruised hand, too. Sigma is going to strangle him.

“You forgot.” It sounds indulgent, and Dazai's voice is soft. He talks like he’d rather be kissing him, and Chuuya decides he likes it. He'd rather be kissing Dazai, too. “Get some sleep, slug, and put ice on that hand.”

“Yeah. You sleep too.”

“I will. I’ll see Chibi tomorrow, then.”

Chuuya's smile quivers.
Part of him would like to talk about what they’ve done *now*.
Part of him wants to find Mitsuru and grovel at her feet, but a large part of his brain even refuses to compute what happened, let alone give it any importance.

And Dazai is right: they need to put at least three hours of sleep

between now and their real, adult lives.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he whispers.

It sounds terribly like the end — and ends are terrifying because they come with an unknown *beginning*.
Now that he’s facing it, Chuuya is not sure he’s ready.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so so much for reading! As always kudos and comments are super welcome, and subscribe to my user for more fics ❤ And as always, Curious Cat is always open too — for comments, prompts suggestions and spoilers!
>
> Next up: the big talk!

Chapter 6: Progress, Part I

Chapter Summary

> “Stay with me forever.”
>
> Where Chuuya kisses Dazai, and it's the worst decision he could ever make.

Chapter Notes

> Beautiful art of SKK here by the wonderful @criistill1 , here by the lovely and super talented Shimon and here and here from the super talented Nina! ❤
>
> So, this was originally one chapter but I had to cut it in three because a certain SKK scene snowballed — as always 😂

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you remember our bet?"

Chuuya looks up, taken aback by the seriousness of Dazai’s voice. He searches for his best friend’s eyes, golden irises reflecting a thousand stars, and lifts an eyebrow when he's met with a crooked smile.

Dazai is hunched on the swing seat, his limbs growing too lanky and willowy for almost everything in their usual playground with every passing day.
Although his bony frame still fits the plastic seat, the swing is suspended too close to the ground for him to sit comfortably, his legs growing too long and bent in a funny way.
In his white school uniform, Dazai almost looks ethereal in the early darkness of a winter afternoon.

The year is almost over, Chuuya finds himself thinking as he absently glances at Dazai. *And that uniform is too small for him.*

The knowledge that Dazai will not have the time to overgrow it completely hits Chuuya next, unwelcome.
His best friend will leave soon.
Although Chuuya has been waiting for it to kick in, it only feels surreal.

In a week, the year will end.
In a week, Dazai will switch schools.
In a week, Chuuya will be *alone*.

He wonders if he'll only ever realize that his best friend is leaving once he'll step past the school gate without Dazai running next to him, complaining loudly for the skipped breakfast.
Likely, reality will push Dazai's absence down his throat every single day until he gets used to it.

"You'll have to be more specific," Chuuya says instead, pushing himself on the swing with a light kick of his heel.
The iron chain creaks with every back and forth of the swing, filling the silence of the park.

"That bet you lost."

Again, as he scrunches his nose in distaste, Chuuya damns Dazai for not being more *precise*.

As if Chuuya doesn't know he's trying to make him admit that he lost hundreds of bets during their friendship — some at rock-paper-scissors, some others at the arcade.
What never changes is that Dazai always wins, and Chuuya will eat his foot before giving him the satisfaction of admitting that out loud.

"What about that?"

"Did you mean it? When you said the loser had to do everything the winner wants?" Dazai asks, his tone aloof as he lightly swings in place.

(The truth is, there's a whole world under Dazai's apparent lack of interest.
A hidden universe, one only for those who can look for the right signs.)

"Hell yes? I never run away from a bet."

"Well, I've been thinking about it." Dazai hesitates, almost sheepish. "And I *think* I know what I want, now."

"Shoot."

It'll be something dumb, Chuuya thinks. Dazai probably wants to order him around like a dog and make him buy fruit sandwiches with

his allowance.
He *knows* his best friend, he knows his sweet tooth and his stupid bets.
And— no matter how annoying Dazai's presence is, Chuuya will miss it.
He'll miss every single thing about him, about *them*.
But thinking about it makes his eyes tingle and his lungs burn, and Chuuya is not ready to cry.
Not *yet*.
Not until it's time to say goodbye.

For now, he's just ready to hear Dazai ask him something ridiculous.

Except—

"Stay by my side forever."

"Ha?"

"Stay." Dazai talks slowly, as if he's breathing around a wad of cotton stuffing his throat. His hollow eyes look for Chuuya. "That's my order for you."

"Are you *ordering* me to be your friend?"

"Yes," Dazai says, without a heartbeat of hesitation. "Even if I'll change schools, Chuuya has to promise he'll still put up with me. No matter where we are. No matter if we don't talk. Just, you have to swear we will never be strangers."

He pauses and, somehow, his unreadable expression seems to dig under Chuuya's flesh.
It curls under his skin, cold, making him shiver because Dazai looks *empty*.

How can his voice sound so poised when he looks about to cry?

"'Samu…"

"Things will change, of course," Dazai interrupts him. "It's only normal. It's stupid to think they won't change, when we won't see each other. You'll go with Tachihara and the others, and I won't have time. I'm fine if we don't talk as much, too. But... I need to know you're in my corner."

"Of course? *Always."*

“Promise me you won’t get bored. Even if it’s a lonely corner, you have to promise.”

Clicking his tongue, Chuuya shrugs the comment away. “Well, I can scream at you over the phone every day.”

Dazai flashes him a quivering smile.

“You misunderstood,” he says, voice soft as if he *knows* life will separate them. As if he’s mourning their friendship before they say goodbye. “You don't have to be loud, Chibi; you just have to be *there.”*

You have to be there.

The implication of I that request leaves a weird taste in Chuuya’s mouth as he toys with the words — forever, strangers, change.
Words that sound life-changing and daunting and *adult.*
Gnawing at his inner cheek, the redhead delays his answer and allows a thick silence to cover them.

He swings in place, unsure of what to say.

He's old enough to know it's unlikely he'll marry Dazai (he doesn’t even *want* to), but still young enough to believe that friendship is forever.
And he doesn’t care if he’s the only one in Dazai’s corner, if nobody else wants to be there.

Chuuya kicks himself on his feet with a little hop as the swing is still moving.
The *thud* of his sneakers hitting the ground makes Dazai scowl, muttering a ‘Chibi is so loud’ under his breath, but he ignores it.
Instead, he stops in front of the other boy and grins.

When he offers Dazai his fist so he can bump it, it seems like a big deal. An oath.

And Chuuya can breathe their *forever* happening right here — he senses it in every mouthful of crisp, cold air.

"I'll be there," he promises, his smirk cutting from cheek to cheek. "I swear. *Idiot."*

—

[Yokohama - present day]

Yesterday night, Nakahara Mitsuru cheated on her boyfriend.

Well.
Sort of.
She cheated on her *pretend* boyfriend with her ex-boyfriend, even though she's not sure it makes what she's done more morally acceptable.
Still — knowing Dazai would approve of that small victory — no remorse grips her stomach as she enters Fujiwara's kitchen.

The minimal, modern kitchen has been cleaned up after the party of the night before - the empty bottles and pizza boxes that peppered the space have been picked up and thrown out by faceless employees that worked while Mitsuru was still sleeping in Fujiwara's bed.
The only memory of the party is the ghost scent of a flowery surface cleaner and a stain of blood on the carpet in the living room.

In the middle of the kitchen, sipping coffee in this newly restored order, Fujiwara Teika looks like a *dream.*

"You stole my shirt," is the first thing he says.
He's wearing khaki shorts and changed into a white clean t-shirt, muscles in plain sight and peach-smooth skin reddened btw the recent shower.

"I did," she says, tugging at the edge of the oversized t-shirt. "Doesn't it look cute?"

Fujiwara hums. "Of course. You're beautiful."

Delighted, Mitsuru rewards the compliment with a beam.
The memories from the previous night — the touches, the moans, Fujiwara's body hovering over her and his skin hot under her touches — come back in a rush, shooting a white-hot shiver down her spine.

"Should we go eat somewhere nice later?" she asks, helping herself to a cup of coffee. She has to play it cool. She *has* to.

"Like, now?" he asks.

"Possibly. You already went for a run, right? Plans for the day?"

Truth be told, Mitsuru *knows* he already went out.
She's asking to be polite, but she heard him: how he got up early, kissed the top of her head, and went for a morning run.

Mitsuru likes the routine of having someone who exercises in the morning, even if her current boyfriend would sulk and talk her into making breakfast for both of them while he snoozes. He's a lazy bastard like that, Dazai, and she loves him to bits.
That's also why he is her best friend and *not* her actual boyfriend.

Now, Dazai is notoriously a good lay.
It's common knowledge that Dazai is good in bed — and he brags about it, *and* he's hot when he brags about it, too.
But, while she breathes in the smell of grounded coffee and sunlight of Fujiwara's kitchen, Mitsuru thinks she couldn't be happier with the current predicament.

She has everything she wants right here: a cup of coffee, the afterglow of a post-orgasm and the love of her life back. And a *date* planned out in her mind.
Yes, she thinks.
It's going to be a good day.

"I don't know," Fujiwara says.

"Maybe for lunch? I was thinking that we could go to a nice café. Something cute."

"I have practice this morning."

Fair enough, Mitsuru tells herself as she takes a sip of unsweetened coffee. There's time.
It's *still* going to be a nice day.

"That's ok. Later?"

"I think… I might have plans. I have to check. But it's not a good idea, anyway."

Her eyebrows furrow. "What's wrong?"

Fujiwara studies her from above the grey mug, his strong jaw tensing as if he's seeing her — truly — seeing her for the first time ever since the party.
He glares as if he just remembered it's *her brother* who spilled blood on his carpet for *her boyfriend.*
In that moment of silence, she can't quite tell if he's jealous or just *disturbed* by the idea of being seen around with her.

“I don’t know, Micchan. You have a boyfriend.”

Puzzled, Mitsuru blinks. “I don’t *have* to have a boyfriend,” she says, ever so slowly.

“Don’t leave Dazai.”

Well, she thinks, her stomach tangled into a taut knot, that’s my choice. Not yours.
He can’t take that decision away from her. It’s not *fair*.

“Why? I thought you didn’t like him,” she says, instead.

“I don’t.” Annoyance is a rumbling thunderstorm rolling at the edge of Fujiwara’s voice, hardening his vowels. “Even less after yesterday, because Riichi is right. But you went out of your way to vouch for him, and he will forgive you."

“Sorry, am I the only one who remembers last night?”

As she utters the words and grasps the coffee mug, sinking her nails into the ceramic, Mitsuru feels her neck and cheeks burn.
There’s something mortifying in having to spell out how she cheated on somebody.

“Again, you’ll bond over it or something. It's surely not something he hasn't done himself, sleeping around."

“Excuse me?"

"You are dating a fuckboy. You can't really expect him to be... y'know." Fujiwara shrugs the rest of the sentence away, letting it trail off into something that is as obvious as it's hurtful: he must have cheated on you before, after all.

“I told you once. Dazai *is* a good person,” she hisses.

"But even you can understand he must know a thing or two about cheating.”

Her shoulders shake, unsure of what to focus on.
Even you. It sounds so patronizing. The next mouthful of air burns her chest.
The Fujiwara she knows is self-absorbed, not cruel; he’s selfish, at times, but loving.
Yet now she looks for Fujiwara’s eyes and he avoids her, shrugging

away her words as if they don't mean much.

As if *she* doesn't mean much.

And, even though Mitsuru hates how thin her voice is, how *tiny* he's making her feel, she can't shake it off.

"Why are you being a dick?"

"I'm saying it wasn't big deal."

"It was a big deal to *me."*

"I know," Fujiwara says. He inhales, rubbing his arms. He shakes his head, mouth opening and closing a couple of times before he speaks again. "Look, Micchan, I'm sorry if you got the wrong impression. I don't want to sound like an asshole, but I really don't want a girlfriend right now. We were drunk. We all needed to distract ourselves." He moves his weight from one foot to the other. His big brown eyes scream innocent surprise even though she suspects there is no *innocence* in what he's doing. "It was fun. It was great. But it was just a night. You didn't really think it was serious, did you?"

Mitsuru stalls. *It was just a night.*

"You know I did."

"I didn't," he replies. Quickly. *Defensive.*

As she mulls over a reply, she tucks a strand of hair in front of her face. In the insecurity of the moment, a thin, caramel-brown veil of hair turns into a shield.
She hides behind it, aware of how exposed she is. For the first time, she feels naked in front of a person she doesn't trust anymore.
Just another girl used and tossed away.

"I thought you liked me," she said.

"I do." Another lie. Another quick answer, and he's looking at her as if she's being *difficult.* They both know he never liked difficult girls; they wear him out. "Not right now. Now you're giving me a headache."

"You're an asshole"

"I'm not the one with a boyfriend."

She scoffs, waving the comment away. “But you were the one who acted like you are above Dazai.”

Fujiwara looks at her, his eyes piercing and dark.
His fingers twitch around the mug.

“And I'm starting to see Dazai is a bad influence on you,” he says.

Somehow, it sounds deeper than a comment.

It’s an insult.
Her best friend’s *existence* is an insult.

That washes away the last residues of love and attachment toward the boy in front of her.
Mitsuru squints and she *sees* him — and he's not a dream anymore.

He's just a regular—

“Hypocrite."

"Calm down."

"Don’t," she growls, blood scorching hot and cheeks on fire. God, she thinks. God, I want to punch the entitled attitude out of him. "Don’t tell me to calm down. I'm calm. You're the one insulting my best friend." *Ah, fuck.* "And my boyfriend."

With a sigh, Fujiwara pinches the bridge of his nose. “We’ve been through it. That shithead is not even the point, and you—“

“Well, he kinda *became* the point after you implied he’ll excuse cheating.”

“—And you’re making it a whole thing, Micchan," Fujiwara says, stretching out the words as he speaks over her. "Just get over it."

He has this way of acting, sometimes, that makes her feel small and dumb — it’s a look, a sentence she’s not allowed to finish, a dismissed feeling. Little gestures that gnaw at her self esteem.
It makes Mitsuru fear that she's acting hysterical and, in response, she *flees*. She always fled.

“Oh, I will,” she assures, standing up. “You’re not that memorable.”

Get over it.

It burns, but it's good advice.
That's too much and, suddenly, she can't stay.
She might punch Fujiwara for speaking ill of her best friend, otherwise, and she can't afford that.
She's above violence. She's better than this; better than *him.*

"Dazai Osamu is a hundred times better than you'll ever be," she says, stalking out of the kitchen. "Asshole."

It takes her five minutes to escape Fujiwara's house, hurrying outside in messy clothes and without even a semblance of makeup.

Fujiwara doesn't try to stop her.
Even though Mitsuru wonders why he wanted her back, if to have fun or win one over Dazai, she doesn't stay for an answer.
He doesn't stop her, and Mitsuru calls him *asshole* in her mind on repeat as she bullets herself out of the house and into the street.

She sneezes at the sunlight that washes over her, the late morning rays warm and cozy against her skin.
The morning seems tranquil.
The breeze blows and the air is so bubbly that Mitsuru can almost forget that she's still wearing the clothes from the night before, and that her ex broke her heart.

Again.

Because, when she turns to look at the house she thinks, *it's over.*

She tried her best, she did, and it's time to let go.

Fujiwara Teika is her ex-boyfriend, and he's been an ass to her friends and she's better off without him.

For the first time, she means it.

Now, as she walks to the station and sits on a bench to look for her phone, she sees she was wrong.
Perhaps she dodged a bullet.

Once she finds the phone, her fingers automatically find the path to a familiar number.
Waving away a man walking in her direction — and Mitsuru wonders in passing if her party dress and disheveled walk-of-shame appearance attracted him, or if he can smell sex and heartbreak on her — she presses the phone against her ear and hopes, hopes, *hopes.*

It takes three rings for the call to get picked up.

“…Hello?”

“Where are you?” she asks, voice shaken by a sob she fights to keep in.

She can hear Dazai think about an answer - which means he’s not home and that he’s not sure if he wants to see her at all, but she doesn’t mind it.
He *will* see her. That’s not up for discussion.
In her brain, there’s not a single reason Dazai would refuse an SOS, because for people like them — people with no one else to turn to — friendship comes first.
And she’s his girlfriend, damn it.
Well, again, *pretend* girlfriend.
Her life is a lie, all to crawl back to a bed that turned out to be cold.

“Osamu?” She nudges. She can almost hear him wince. “Do I bother you?”

“Hm?”

“Are you with a girl?”

“Ah— no. *No.* Sorry. What did you say?”

“Where are you?”

A millisecond of hesitation. “Odasaku’s house. Ango and Odasaku went to get breakfast.”

Good, Mitsuru thinks, gnawing at her bottom lip. See? Friends. Dazai is *all* about friends.
Besides, she’s silently glad to find Dazai alone and out of his house: she doesn't want to *confront* Chuuya, or she’ll have to scold her little brother for socking an asshole in the jaw.

Even if said asshole deserved it.

“Cool. I’m coming to you," she says.

Because Mitsuru might not have anything left, but she still has Dazai. Fujiwara won’t ruin her good day.

—

This is not going according to plan.

First of all, Dazai didn't expect to see Mitsuru first thing in the morning.
Ideally, spending the night at Fujiwara's was going to keep her occupied long enough for him to sort out his feelings for Chuuya, and what happened and - perhaps most importantly - how to go about it.
He went to sleep with the memory of Chuuya written all over his body, and the taste of angry kissing and blood and wine painted his restless dreams.
But Mitsuru has been crying, and Dazai can't ignore that.
Glittering streams of tears not yet dried wet her cheeks, and her bottom lip is shaking when she swings open the door to Odasaku's kitchen.

Her face — the apples of her cheeks, her neck, her ears — is spotted with red.

"Micchan?"

"Can you hug me?" she asks, keeping her head down as she makes a beeline into the room.

Dazai's stomach folds, and he doesn't know if it's because of how thin her voice comes out or for the way she takes her hug, sneaking her lean arms around his hips as if to keep him secured against her throbbing heartbeat.
She presses her face into his chest, and Dazai's heart starts running. Maddened, drumming against his bones.

"Hey, what—"

"I'm glad to see you," she says.

The faint trace of Fujiwara's presence still lingers on her body, and Dazai ponders that it's the most basic, beta-male-who-plays-cool smell on the planet — pine and amber body shower and some dumb, soulless cologne Fujiwara saw in an idol commercial.
As he dips his nose in her uncombed hair, Dazai realizes Mitsuru smells like a hip-but-overpriced clothing store, the kind with dim lights and surfers on the LED screens and logos of American universities printed on oversized sweaters.
It's *that* kind of scent, and it makes him want to barf.

“What’s wrong?” he murmurs.

“You were right,” she hums, rubbing her nose against his shirt. “He’s an idiot.”

Dazai bites his bottom lip, barely stopping himself from chirping *“Ah, called it,”* out of sheer spite.
Instead, he tries to think about how she must feel - how mortifying it must be to go to such lengths for a boy who turns out to be an asshole.
When he brushes his lips over her hair, it's dry and *gentle*.
He pulls away just enough to glance at the path of the tears on her cheeks; he looks for her eyes - glossy, filled with *shame*, eyes that for a moment remind him of his own shame - and attempts an encouraging smile.
He skims a thumb under her eye, gently, capturing one tear under the pad of his finger.

“What did he do?”
His voice is mellow even though part of him would like to punch Fujiwara for making his best friend cry.

“He did a bunch of things. I cheated on you.”

He smirks into her hair. “Then I believe congratulations are in order.”

“Yeah, no, he said it didn’t mean anything.” Mitsuru sniffles, pointing her chin against Dazai’s sternum and looking up. “It made me feel like sleeping together was the only thing he’d like to have back from me—*all* of me. Like it was the only good thing about me.” She swallows, and Dazai’s heart squeezes into his chest. “I feel so small.”

“Should I break his nose?”

“Please.”

“I’m sorry, Micchan. I really am.”

Then he stops, biting his bottom lip.
He's not sure how to do this friendly, nor how to cheer a girl up without making it blatantly physical.
Crying people weird him out, and cuddling has always been awkward: it's either trading sexual touches — conveniently, he’s discovered people stop their bawling if he kisses them — or he escapes contact altogether.
In all his life, Chuuya has been the only exception to the rule.

Now, however, he gently places his thumb on Mitsuru's chin, guiding her to tilt her head up.

"Look at me. You have *us,* ok?"

"I guess," she mumbles.

"And Fujiwara is an entitled dickhead anyway."

"Hm-m."

"You are worth much more than a one-night stand at a terrible party."

"It sucked, huh?" Mitsuru echoes, shooting him a watered-down grin. Her eyes shine with mirth, and she sounds a little more like the friend he knows. "Aside from my brother punching somebody in the face. Which was epic, by the way."

"Yeah, about that." A pause. Dazai takes a deep breath and stretches his clammy hand, his entire body fighting the confession. "I have been trying to ignore something with Chuuya, lately."

"Oh?"

"I swear I tried to make sense of it. But things happened yesterday, and he kissed me, or I kissed him, and—"

He rambles the explanation out with his full lungs, vomiting out the words as if they might poison him if he keeps them in one second more. They stumble one over the other and he *lets* them go, his stomach tangled into a mess.
When Mitsuru gawks at him, hurt and horrified, Dazai feels like he's jumping from a cliff without any assurance of survival.

"You kissed!?" She cries, with a vehemence that leaves Dazai dizzy.

"Yeah."

"I'm— When? Why didn't you tell me right away?"

"Why should I have told you?!"

"Because it's fantastic!"

—Wait.
Maybe she's not hurt and horrified after all.

Dazai takes a step back as if Mitsuru's words slapped him.
Fantastic.
No, he thinks, with a deaf ring in his ears. Well, yes. He heard it. And he thinks it's fantastic, too.
But it doesn't make *any* sense.

"…What?"

"I— you guys! It's great!"

"Great?"

A tiny grin curls Mitsuru's lips. "I mean, I suspected something a million years ago, but *really?* A kiss? I thought you were just a tactile pair of friends, but what—"

"Wait." Daza interrupts her, grabbing her shoulders. For a long, horrifying moment he fears she might run away with those words that don't make any sense and leave him wondering forever. "You suspected *what?"*

"I mean, Chuuya had a crush? I guess? And I thought you didn't like boys *that* way?"

"I don't like *any* other boy," Dazai all but screeches. "What was I supposed to do, go to him and be like, 'hey, you are popular and hot and the crush of a lifetime, want to hook up?'"

When Mitsuru stops, mulling over the words for a moment, Dazai can hear his own blood rushing in his eardrums.
Her face is still tired, her eyes still reddened and puffy, but her pout softens.

"First of all, yes, 'wanna hook up?' is exactly what you were supposed to say. Like, on day one. But, also, you guys were talking about marriage when you were kids!"

"And he never said a thing about it again? Chuuya goes out with *jocks.* Look at him!"

"Look at *yourself!"*

"And so what?"

She glares at him. "Are you doing this on purpose? Because it's not funny."

“Do I look like I’m having fun?” Dazai roars back, voice calm but swollen with barely contained frustration.

The outburst makes him *flinch,* and it's enough for Mitsuru to quiet down too.
Then, the girl takes a deep breath and steps away just enough to rest her hands on her hips - and Dazai's heart stutters, because her eyes gleam with the same, stubborn energy that sets Chuuya's blue eyes ablaze when he's annoyed.
She looks exactly like her brother as she sports that childish, bossy attitude that makes the Nakahara siblings look *cute* and terrifying at the same time.

Right now, Dazai suspects Mitsuru might hit him. Chuuya would. And he hates it because, no matter how much he stares at her, he can’t find any tale-telling sign of a joke or a lie.
This *is* a mess.
And yet, it’s the best mess he could find himself in.

So, no.
Nothing of this is going according to plan.
This is freedom, and Dazai never wanted to be free: freedom is terrifying.
Especially so when it has been under his nose all this time, and he failed to see it.

“...Osamu.”

His shoulders go rigid. “Yes ma’am.”

“If I know my brother — and believe me, I will never kick myself enough for not trusting my guts, Chuuya has no idea about how you feel. He’s pretty damn sure you’re into girls. We all were. And he knows you have *plenty* of flings. But now it's kind of obvious how you two have— God, this is my mess.” She sinks her hands in her hair, pale knuckles disappearing into the messy waves that fall free over her shoulders. “I am so sorry, Osamu. I had no idea.”

Dazai hesitates.
Can he hope, can he *ask?*

“Do you think he…?”

She smiles right back. “I *know* he does.”

“Then I guess I have to tell him."

“Of course.” She nods. “Sure. You guys have to talk first, and I'll call Chuuya once you're done.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Is that truly fine with you?”

“Well, I want to offer moral support and apologize, but I kinda don't want to third wheel when you two finally have that overdue make-out session…”

“I *meant,* for the fake dating,” Dazai groans, eyes narrowing.
Jesus.
The last thing he needs now is to think about Chuuya kissing him, and to summon the memory of hungry fingers touching his face and soft lips breathing against his mouth. He wants more of that.
He *needs* more.

Dramatically, Mitsuru rolls her eyes. “What about that?”

“I won’t be able to help anymore.”

“Oh, for God’s sake— I’m breaking up with you, Osamu. Officially.” She pauses, then gestures in the direction of the door. Despite her deep scowl and reddened eyes, Dazai can peek at a smile crossing her face. “I'll explain to Odasaku and Ango. *You* go to Chuuya.”

—

Chuuya has been awake since five in the morning.

He successfully navigated through a shooting for a lingerie commercial, a work breakfast and two hours in the library for an essay on the Battle of Versailles but, no matter how successful has been the day so far, he’s not sure he can face this.

He saw Mitsuru’s text — *I messed up. Call me back,* it said — and dutifully ignored it with a wad of cotton in his throat and the vivid memory of kissing Dazai in the forefront of his brain.

So here he is, once again, sitting in the kitchen he shares with Dazai, waiting for bad news.
He looks at Dazai, who is leaning against the fridge at a safe distance, and waits. He takes in his lean frame and how he can’t quite keep still for more than a minute, arms crossed over his salmon-pink shirt with his sleeves rolled up, and his legs bouncing nervously. The black jeans suit him.

He’s handsome, Chuuya finds himself thinking with a tinge of envy.

The lack of sleep and hydration is almost invisible on his face, saved from a hint of purple under his eyes and the tiny red veins in the milky white of his sclera. There's so much white - his bandages, peeking from under the shirt, and his eyes and the alabaster of his skin.

And, not for the first time, he thinks that Dazai looks beautiful when he’s worn out, like a cursed poet or a tormented angel; even misery looks nice on him, his charm only enhanced by the hardships of life.

“There’s something I must tell you,” Dazai starts, voice leveled.

“Alright,” he says.

It’s weird to look at Dazai after the party, remembering as he does that he bloodied his knuckles for him.
Just looking at his eyes — honey-gold, lambent in the afternoon light — makes Chuuya want to smile.

You are in love with him.

He supposes Oda saw right through him, huh? Or maybe it was *that* obvious.

“About yesterday.”

A shiver runs down Chuuya’s spine. “Right?”

“Mitsuru broke up with me.”

Chuuya halts, his dreamy thoughts coming to an abrupt halt with a screeching sound.
“Oh,” he says.

“We had a chat this morning and, well, it was for the better. Really.”

Good, Chuuya’s brain provides, great news. Then, immediately: No. Bad.
This is bad.
Guilt follows suit after surprise — a cold pang in his stomach, guided by a hunch that the sudden breakup is his fault. *He* kissed Dazai.
He punched that Riichi-whatever-the-name.
He peeked under Dazai's bandages.
By doing that, by acting so flamboyantly in love as if he has a right to

step into somebody else's relationship, he shattered Dazai's happiness.

Oh, God, he thinks. He's an asshole.

"What?"

Lifting his hands and showing his open palms, Dazai signals him to settle down.

"I know it's sudden, but let me finish. She broke up with me, but it doesn't even matter because we were not— exactly dating." Dazai swallows. He fidgets with a button of his salmon-pink shirt. "We were never really together."

"Is this a way to make me feel less of an asshole?" Chuuya asks, eyebrows jumping up.

"No. I'm saying we were *acting* like we were dating."

"What does that mean?"

"Long story short, she needed help to get back that idiot Fujiwara and asked me to fake-date her."

Chuuya's jaw hangs open.
He sees Dazai's mouth moving, he meets his eyes overflowing with a guilt he can't quite pinpoint, yet it doesn't make any sense.

"What?!"

"Yeah. It sounds dumb." Yeah, no shit, Chuuya thinks, flabbergasted. "But I'm telling you now."

Chuuya's brain glitches, rejecting the information.
He opens his mouth and closes it again. When he scrambles for an answer, he surprises to not find anything — only emptiness and black and a sense of lost purpose, of *breaking down.*

It's not true, on repeat.

"Oh," Chuuya says, deadpan. "Ok."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"Please," Dazai says, studying Chuuya's reaction as the boy ponders

what would be best — murder Dazai or murder Mitsuru. “Say something.”

“I don’t know, fucking *congrats?* What the fuck.”

Dazai’s head drops — it’s a moment of strengthless regret, but it looks comically fake. Too late, too unconvincing. “I know I should have told you.”

“You lied to me.”

“I helped Micchan,” he says, voice strained. “She didn’t want to tell you, and I didn’t think you’d care. Before last night, I had no idea.”

“You made me believe you were dating my sister!”

“And I promise you I wouldn’t have done it, if I knew you felt a certain way!”

Immediately, Chuuya’s body goes rigid — he scowls, his back pressed against the chair.
Everything in his posture screams defensive.

“I don’t feel a *certain* way?!”

“Chuuya—“

“I don’t feel a *certain* way, Dazai. I assure you, I don’t feel in any fucking way,” Chuuya growls.
Every breath he takes around the block in his windpipe burns.

He hears himself — voice hurried, embarrassed, laughing off Dazai’s words — and cringes.

Dazai settles against the kitchen counter with his arms crossed, his jaw tense.

“See? This is exactly why we keep running in circles,” he says, gesturing between them. “Forget the years of no contact. Forget *that* for a second. We spent six months in the same damn house as old friends.”

“You are into girls.”

“Am I?” Dazai’s eyes narrow as he speaks, the hard hostility in them causing Chuuya to flinch. “I *did* go out with boys. Boys I didn’t like and reminded me of you.” A pause, and Dazai’s eyes go dark. His

voice dips. “I would have told you, if you had asked. I *kissed* you. But I guess you didn’t need my input to stamp a label on me.”

“Well, I—”

“I messed up, and I’m sorry. But don’t *assume* things about me, Chuuya.” His mouth twitches down. “Man up and talk, for fuck’s sake.”

It’s not like Dazai to cuss, and the simple word sucks the air out of the room.
His voice is a rumble — low, but loaded, filled with poison.
You didn’t need to ask to stamp a label on me.

The thing is, Chuuya knows the feeling. He knows the powerless feeling of being caged and misunderstood.
The anger comes in waves, but it’s *shame* that causes him to speak louder instead, to stand on shaky feet and raise his voice until it’s throaty and his lungs burn and his vocal cords hurt.

Yet, no matter how much he screams, he has a feeling he will never be louder than Dazai’s quiet anger.

“Said the king of motherfucking communication, hah?!” He replies, stopping inches away from Dazai. “Again. You still. Fucking. Pretended to be dating my sister.”

“And I said I’m sorry.”

“Like I believe anything that comes out of your shitty mouth.”

“Oh, come *on*—“

“No, *you* come on,” Chuuya roars, leaning forward. He feels Dazai’s warmth on his skin, mirroring himself in dark pupils. “I knew I had to stay away from your lying ass.”

Dazai looks at him from above; eyes sharp, mouth slightly tilted downward. Unfazed.
Chuuya scowls.
He feels laughed at even if Dazai is not laughing at all.

“Lying? I didn’t *lie* to you, Chuuya. But if we are being honest, here, my guess is that you remembered you liked me the moment I sat you down on this stupid chair and told you I was dating your sister.” His lips twitch, though Chuuya can’t guess if that’s a pout of a joyless grin.

“How do you expect me to know you if you keep me out? Enlighten me. Because of a teddy bear with my name?”

It’s a low blow.
Dazai *regrets* it immediately — Chuuya can read it in the almost invisible twitch of his eyebrows, he sees the discomfort through the mask of cold control Dazai is wearing. The sharp precision of words that cut deep and make him bleed falters.

But it's too late to take it back, when Shane already flushed up Chuuya’s cheeks.

The way Dazai is looking down on him, cutting him out, sets fire to his anger.

"Don't," he growls. "So what if I *liked* you, you narcissistic asshole? You don't need friends. You shut people out." A pause; he inhales, venom dripping from his words. "No wonder nobody fucking stands you.”

Dazai’s eyes widen before they narrow; it’s a second of hurt, of surprise, as if he didn’t know how deep words could cut.
Then, his lips twitch up, his voice rings thick and sickly sweet.
His smirk is cruel, it hurts, it shuts Chuuya out — and he knows he shut himself out when he built the wall between them first, and now he can’t lower them anymore and he’s stuck.
He’s stuck in an argument that is draining him and from which he can’t crawl out.

“At least I'm not an immature kid.”

"At least I'm not an unsentimental asshole."

"And at *least* I don’t depend on people's approval like a dog.”

Instantly, Chuuya lurches forward. His hand fists Dazai’s shirt, pale fingers against the bright pink cotton.
He drags Dazai down, nose against nose, inches apart. He holds on until his knuckles pale down as the other’s breath ghosts over his face, damp and warm.

“Eat. Shit.”

Dazai grins, leaning forward. His voice is a low, husky drawl, and Chuuya’s hand twitches around the fabric.

“What are you going to do, *Chu-u-ya~?* Punch me too?”

“Fuck you.”

“Find something more articulate, will you? If you can.”

Suddenly, they are arguing in hushed voices and explosive tones.
Their timbres slow, their faces close, the tension thick in the air.
The anger bubbles under the surface of apparent calmness, still furious but ice-cold.

“I hate you,” Chuuya growls, his eyes fixed on Dazai’s lips.

“Good. Because I regret ever meeting you,” Dazai whispers, gaze so deep Chuuya could drown and die and disappear in it. It’s crimson. It’s tempting.

Forcing himself to tear his eyes away from the other, Chuuya lowers his gaze to Dazai’s mouth again. His attention lingers on the pink bow of the bottom lip, so inviting. So delicate.

I hate you, he thinks.

I hate you.

A moment later, he’s pressing Dazai between his body and the fridge.
He wants to hit him. He *really* does.
But Dazai dips over him, lips parted and soft as they meet halfway.

Before he can think about it, before he can argue that this is *not* how he envisioned the conversation, Chuuya kisses back.
He kisses back with too much tongue and teeth, with his whole body; he kisses with the vehemence of a physical fight.
Dazai bites his bottom lip, touches scorching as he fists Chuuya’s hair and pulls.

Despite himself, Chuuya grins — but it’s barely a second of relief, of respire, because Dazai acts fast.
He grabs Chuuya’s shoulder and pushes him back, forcing the redhead to stagger backward before switching their positions.

He presses him back against the wall, and Chuuya can feel their fluttering heartbeats pressed between their bodies as he opens his mouth and *yields.*
His hands are in Dazai’s hair as Dazai’s leg presses in between his thighs, and he’s not sure anymore if their bodies are fighting or

screaming furious love confessions at each other.

Maybe neither.

Maybe both.

And maybe he doesn't *care,* because a shiver jolts down his spine when Dazai moans into his mouth.

They probably have to stop kissing like this, but Chuuya doesn't *want* to.

He wants to feel Dazai's hands in his hair like so. It's fire. It's a string finally snapping.
It's pure instinct, like a heart beating, primordial as the taste of blood on Dazai's tongue because Chuuya gnawed at his lips as if a bite can make up for the pain, claiming that as retribution for the lies.

And Chuuya only soars *higher* with the pain — even more more so if Dazai's lips taste so sweet.

They don't taste like anger.
They're slowing down, the kisses deeper and longer as his tongue roughly pushes between Chuuya's teeth, and his hand blocks Chuuya's chin to keep him in place.

With the other hand, Dazai fists a handful of hair to angle his head, throwing it back as he presses the other between his body and the wall, fingers tripping over auburn strands.

In response, Chuuya clutches the fabric and tugs Dazai further down by the collar of his shirt.
It nullifies a non-existent distance, anger and need seeping through his ragged breaths and messy kisses.

"Fuck you," he says, mouth against mouth.

"I'm sorry," Dazai answers back, resting his forehead against Chuuya's.

It's a little shy of a whisper, but it ripples in Chuuya like a scream. The apology is so raw — too much unveiled honesty, so uncharacteristic for Dazai — that he struggles to accept the words for a second.

I'm sorry.

The question is, is that enough?

Tearing himself away from Dazai's grip and storming out of the house is the stupidest idea Chuuya could come up with, and the one thing he wishes Dazai wouldn't let him do.

Instead, it's *exactly* what happens.

He walks out, with bruises on his ego and Dazai's taste on his tongue.

—

There's no simple way of digesting betrayal.

That's the only conclusion Chuuya has come to when he shows up in the kitchen again, after half an hour spent pacing in the streets in front of their house. He walked to a vending machine nearby, a cold square of plastic nestled and half-forgotten between a bus stop and a crossroad.
He contemplated punching it, and kicked the brick wall instead.
He hurt his feet but his heart still hurts more, and it may be a shitty consolation but it's one nonetheless.

When he enters the room Dazai barely looks up to acknowledge him, his eyes stubbornly glued on an open book with yellowish pages he has read a million times before.

Absently, Chuuya's gaze traces the curve of Dazai's face, his dark hair and elegant neck — the bandages, the ghost of the skin underneath, the soft curls caressing his cut-glass jaw.

He's beautiful, he still thinks; he hates himself for it now.

Because Dazai is exactly the same person he fell in love with and, yet, now, he seems ruined. Different. He hates the imperfect perfection of the boy he loves and, simultaneously, the boy he's angry at.

And… he *should* be angry, right?
Not like this.
Now he's annoyed, and he's quite sure people will say it's not enough.
Chuuya hates himself for it, too.
If asked, h e's ready to blame this weakness of the heart on the bottled-up love and on the knowledge that they are both at fault.

Because — perhaps is the discovery, nothing short of wonderful, that he can kiss Dazai, perhaps it's the sensation of gauze under his fingers

— Chuuya can hate himself but can't bring himself to hate *him.*

Lethargic refusal takes over every time he tries to set on being furiously, painfully angry, and all Chuuya knows is that he doesn't have the energy or decisiveness to hate somebody he loves.
The compass of his soul points to Dazai.
That he can't change.

As Chuuya pushes into the room, gauging the silence and dreading the conversation ahead, conflicting emotions toss and turn in him — I forgive you, I hate you, I see you, I want you, I *beg* you tell me there's a simple way out of it.
If anything, the situation taught him there's no single dimension to pain.
Pain is a crystal.
It reflects the light, bending emotions — a gem hard and solid and cutting under the skin as Chuuya keeps it close to his heart.

"For the record, I'm not here to kiss you again," Chuuya starts, in the most colorless voice he can muster, moving his weight from one foot to the other.

Dazai humms.

"Can't say I like where this is going."

"*Dazai,"* he calls, a little shy of desperate. "Please. I *will* kick you in the face if you annoy me now."

When he's met with a slight nod of Dazai's head, Chuuya's heart slows down.
He's not sure if he's talking about the kiss or the fake dating mess, but he decides it applies to both. Apparently, he's not the only one who doesn't know how to handle the situation.

"No," Dazai murmurs, with a tilt of his head. "*No,* I understand. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry about everything else I said, too." Chuuya sighs, raking a hand through red hair. Almost immediately, Dazai does the same - absently, *casually,* running lean fingers through thick brown curls. "You were right, too. I was over you before I got pissed at my sister. By the way, I had no right to assume your feelings."

"Thank you."

"I didn't mean to say you deserve to be alone."

"And *I* didn't mean what I said," Dazai offers, under his breath.

It's enough to make Chuuya's stomach drop.
The tragedy of it all is that he's forgiving Dazai for lying as they speak.
His emotions blur the line between forgiveness and anger and, as he hides his hands in his pockets, his heart swings between *fuck it* and *fuck you.*

"Yeah… huh, about that. You know about 'Samu."

Dazai shoots a glance in his direction, eyes darker as a single, deep wrinkle appears on his forehead.

"The name-stealer? Yes."

"Oh my God," Chuuya says, with a scoff. Name-stealer. How dramatically, quintessentially *Dazai.* Despite everything, he finds himself biting back a grin. "I assume Mitsuru told you?"

"She did."

"Did she also say why she didn't want to tell me about you guys?"

Dazai's eyes wander to the book again.
This time they *stay* there, seeking refuge in a page he surely knows by heart. Chuuya would gladly punch him to earn even a second of eye contact.
Because Dazai is wounded and he's hiding, and Chuuya understands but they *can't* keep running away from each other.

Not now.

"Look, Dazai…"

"I think this is a matter between you and your sister, Chuuya."

"So *now* you decide you're done meddling?"

"Yes," he says, without a moment of hesitation. "I shouldn't have agreed in the first place. But Micchan asked for help, and I did exactly that and now I realize we all went about it in the wrong way." A pause. "And I promise you, she loves you. She's sorry too. But I, *we*... I hate that we always have something between us. *Why* do we keep

building walls between us, Chibi?”

Weakly, Chuuya shakes his head.

“Fuck if I know, really. It's mad annoying."

"I hate it."

"Yeah. Me too."

“So what, now?”

With Dazai refusing to meet his eyes, Chuuya gnaws at his bottom lip.
The straightforward answer is: I don’t know.
He’s not sure it’s also the *honest* answer, though.

“I just don’t want to be here right now,” he says, after a second.

He can see Dazai’s shoulders flop, and his entire figure crumples up like paper under the rain.

“Right. I suppose that’s fair.”

“I’m—“ Chuuya hesitates. I love you, he thinks. It’s always been you.
“I just better cool off before I say more shit I don't mean.”

He may stay somewhere else. He’ll go to Albatross, maybe.
It won’t be long, maybe a day or a week or something in between, but he’s not sure he wants to see Dazai *or* Mitsuru now.

“Sure,” Dazai says, with a tiny nod. “Of course.”

But his amber eyes turn sad, and Chuuya wants to tug him in his arms and kiss his eyelids and hold him close. He wants to learn how it is to kiss Dazai slowly, without the kick of adrenaline or the fire of a fight. He wants to kiss him *gently* and love him and *savor* every inch of him.
Instead, he steps forward.
He stretches his right arm, considering touching Dazai — brushing his shoulder, running his hand through his hair — and changing his mind halfway. He runs his hand through his hair instead, and inhales.
Deeply.

Forcefully.

“Though— once I promised to stay by a certain idiot’s side forever,” he whispers, offering Dazai a tiny smile when the boy's head jolts up.

“What?”

“I said I’d be in your corner, didn’t I?”

I will marry ‘Samu. I promise.
I swear.

“…Chibi *did* promise, I guess.”

As Chuuya swallows, keeping the smile in place is an exercise of unimaginable strength.

“I did,” he whispers. “So I’ll see you when I don’t want to strangle you, *‘Samu.”*

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter and thank you so much for reading ❤
It would have been SO easy to go down the drama route, but instead we’ll have dumb, bruised skk sorting out their feelings in the next chapters! And there’s a certain 🐭 too :3c
Let me know what you think ❤

Chapter 7: Progress, Part II

Chapter Summary

“I kissed my childhood best friend.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea.”

Chapter Notes

Can SKK be happy for too long? Obviously not 🧢

Chuuya crosses the door to The Old World as if walking through a dream.

The bar has always been a home away from home, a safe harbor where Chuuya could find his friends and (most importantly, perhaps) a never-ending stash of wine.
However, this time, he’s not sure that the familiarity of the venue will be enough to shake this sense of sleepwalking off of him.

The last few days pushed him to his knees, leaving him half alive.

Dazai never dated Mitsuru.

Dazai likes him.

The world shifted from its axis.

At least, as soon as he steps into The Old World, his nostrils flare with a bouquet of familiar smells.
Sweet alcohol, beer, nicotine, burning bread—

Wait.

As he scans the room, Chuuya’s eyes quickly find Albatross.
Thank *God* he’s around.

The boy’s heart closes around the familiar presence, holding onto it with a warm sense of reassurance; if Albatross is at The Old World, he’s gonna be *okay*.
He has someone in his corner.

His best friend is standing behind the counter, with his tongue in between his teeth and sunglasses resting on the top of his head,

maneuvering a hair straightener that definitely belongs to Lippmann. Weird, Chuuya thinks, but not the weirdest thing Tross has ever done.

A few steps away, Ice Man is fumbling through the bottles, rearranging them by color, a cigarette burning between his lips despite the several *no smoking allowed* signs inside the venue.

Not that anybody would tell him to quit, anyway, when The Old World is *Ice Man's* bar.

"Oi, what the fuck is going on?" Chuuya asks, pushing forward.

Why is he smelling bread again? This is not a *fucking* bakery.

"The toaster is broken," Albatross says.

Chuuya's eyebrow jumps up. "Huh, ok?"

"So I wanted a toast and borrowed Lippmann's hair straightener," Albatross explains.

As he says that — words Chuuya struggles to believe if he's honest, although he suddenly clocks with a vague smell of burnt cheese — Albatross' expression says it's obvious. He pouts like it's Chuuya's fault for not keeping up.
The gall of him, really.

Brow furrowing, with an unspoken question on the tip of his tongue, Chuuya glances at Ice Man. The other returns the gaze and shakes his head.

"Don't bother," he says, as if their best friend isn't heating a *sandwich* using their *other* best friend's imported-from-fuck-knows-where hair straightener.

Chuuya looks at Albatross— he stares at him, hands in his pockets, making sure to scan the words of his next question to be *unequivocally* understandable.
Just in case this is a lucid dream, you know.

"I will ask that again," he says. "What in the MasterChef hell is going on here?"

"He tried the stove first," Ice Man explains, voice leveled. He moves closer to Chuuya, casually putting off the stub in an onyx ashtray overflowing with ash and cigarettes. "Your friend almost burned down

the place twice."

Biting back the comment that he doubts they have a fire alarm at the club, Chuuya squints. "He's your friend too, y'know."

"Not when he acts like an idiot."

"I can hear you!" Albatross chimes in.

Chuuya's head dips to the side, his tone flat. "Does 'Lip know?"

Ice Man's eyebrow twitches. "What do you think?"

"I think we gotta cash in before he shows up, funerals are expensive."

Fantastic.

This is fucking fantastic.

Albatross glances at him, eyes turning into narrow beads of lucid black. "Yo, shorty. Why are you such a bitch today?"

"Call me shorty again and I will straighten your tongue with that thing." Then, taken aback by his own harshness, Chuuya halts. It was an immediate backlash — a string that frayed for too long and finally snapped, addressing his anger at the wrong person.
When Albatross' eyebrows jump up in a tell-tale sign that he is being bitchy, Chuuya's shoulders sag. He takes a deep breath, inwardly cursing Dazai. "Nothing happened," he lies, pushing into the club and plummeting on a stool.

Then he leans his head on the counter, cheek against wood, his skin boiling against the lacquered wooden surface.

He needs a drink. *Now.*
Whoever said that wine before five pm is bad never had to deal with boys.

Stupid, shitty boys and their stupid *shitty* lies.

"Chuuya? Do we have to pspsps you?"

Somehow doubting Tross can convince Ice Man to pspsps anyone, and especially a grown man, Chuuya groans. "Just drop it."

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m your best friend. Don’t piss in my mouth and tell me it’s raining,” Albatross says, a scowl crossing his face.

“Picturesque, ‘Tross.”

“Spill it.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “...It’s Dazai,” he eventually mumbles, sounding thin and defeated. He pillows his head on his crossed arms and rests his chin in the empty space between his forearms.

Albatross frowns. “What did he do?”

As he says that, he sits the hair straightener and the slice of toast on the counter to reach for him.

The bread remains white and uncooked but, disregarding it with one last glance, Albatross abandons his cooking quest to take the stool next to Chuuya.
He falls on it messily, as if his brain decided on the action before his limbs could follow properly.

He has this way of moving, Albatross, that is fast and clumsy at the same time, as if he has grown tall too soon and never had the patience to train himself to move with grace.

It always reminded Chuuya of a puppy with the zoomies, and it never failed to steal a smile out of him. Even *now.*

“Tell us,” Ice Man encourages him while taking the stool at the other side of Chuuya.

The man, on the other hand, is everything Albatross is not — graceful, silent. Waiting to commit a murder nobody will ever solve.

“Long story short, Micchan and Dazai were fake-dating behind my back all this time.”

Albatross’s jaw falls. *“What?!”*

“I see,” Ice Man says, rising to his feet again. His voice is a quiet

declaration of war as he heads to the wine shelf. “Start from the top. I’ll make you a glass of wine.”

Chuuya flashes him a smile, knowing that fixing him a drink is the highest form of affection Ice Man could show.
Very, *very* few people ever had the honor of Ice Man pouring them a drink.

Bumping his shoulder against Albatross’ arm, looking for contact, Chuuya exhales. He wills himself to go through the recent events again, starting from the top.

He makes his way through the last twenty-four hours - the punch, the kiss, the fight.

The kiss again.
He leafs through the memories as if through a diary, searching for anger when he can only find a deep, unwavering affection bastardized with betrayal.

How easily he *believed* Mitsuru and Dazai.

How *dumb* he was.

And, after all, the crazy thing is that Chuuya wishes somebody would just tell him that it’s fine and that he can go to Dazai and tell him about all the times he dreamt about kissing him.

The memory of lanky arms trapping him against the fridge makes his blood sing for all the wrong reasons.

However, as he says those words out loud — *‘they didn’t tell me,’* just ripping off a band-aid around his heart— Chuuya’s voice cracks into a low, menacing rumble.

“...And I’m not mad that they fake-dated or whatever, yeah? Who the fuck cares.” He sighs, wetting his lips on a sip of wine. “I only wanted to be part of it.”

Albatross tilts his head to the side, his sunglasses slipping forward as he moves. “You won’t like what I’m about to say.”

“Shoot.”

“Dazai is this guy you’ve known for five minutes of your adult life. And we know you have been pining for him since your diaper days.

We know he is your childhood fiance or whatever. We *get* it. You know the keyword here?"

Chuuya shakes his head, his lips hovering over the glass. It's his third by now, but he still feels painfully lucid.

"Friends?"

"Childhood," Ice Man interjects, fidgeting with a silver lighter he conjured from the back pocket of his tailored black pants. "Now you've grown. You clearly like Dazai, and you love your sister."

"Unfortunately."

"Enough to forgive them?"

For lack of a better answer, Chuuya shakes his head.

That is a great question.

Maybe if he and Dazai stopped kissing instead of arguing like normal people, who first beat each other up and then talk their shit out, he would have a less blurry response to offer.

"Sure," he murmurs, squirming on his seat. Indecision makes him restless. "I'm pissed off, but it's not a murder or anything."

"It could be if *we* murder them," Albatross says. "I have a shovel somewhere with my bike, I reckon, and we can frame that annoying old guy from down the road."

"Yeah, leave Natsume-san out of it."

Albatross ignores him. "Right. I *like* his cat. We can block their numbers, then. Make Micchan grovel at your feet."

"Less dramatic and more civil," Ice Man agrees with a slight nod.

For a moment, Chuuya thinks it over.

He might as well consider the proposition, if anything because Albatross and Ice Man agreeing on something is a once-in-a-blue-moon occurrence.

Maybe the world *is* ending.

But the truth is, Chuuya doesn't know what he wants.

“Maybe? I’m just— Really, am I being too much?” he asks, instead, in a thin voice. He doesn’t even have time to finish the sentence, though. When Ice Man’s hand slaps his nape, not strong enough to hurt but vehement enough to deliver a message, Chuuya’s nose sinks into the glass. “Ouch?!”

“Don’t make us call Doc,” Ice Man says, deadpan.

“Yeah. Don’t say dumb stuff.”

Despite their harsh tones, Chuuya hears it: *your reactions are never too much, or too little. They are always exactly valid.*

The reassurance fastens the knot in his throat again, and he breathes around the surging need to weep.
Not because of Dazai, or Mitsuru, or because he slept a total of three hours in three days, but because he’s grateful for his friends.

He never thought the Flags would close ranks around him so quickly. He never even *considered* asking for help.

“You guys are awful. I was just saying,” he still says, lips hovering over his wine glass. *Thank you,* he means. “I guess I just don’t want to see those two.”

“Ha, that’s an easy fix,” Albatross offers, clasping Chuuya’s shoulder. “My couch is your couch. It’s gonna be fun.”

Side-glancing Ice Man to make sure he has no more therapeutic whacks in store, Chuuya ponders over the offer.

His lips linger over the cold rim of the glass as he plays with the possibility of couch-surfing for a couple of days.

Albatross’ tiny apartment is always filled with pounding music and packed with people who invited themselves for some impromptu house party, but maybe a distraction is what he needs.

He likes Dazai.

Dazai likes him.

Stay by my side.
You don’t have to be loud, you just have to be there.

And he will respect that promise, but he needs a breather.

“You know what?” Chuuya says. He smiles. “Thanks, ‘Tross. Your couch sounds great.”

—

Dazai Osamu has kissed his forever crush, Nakahara Chuuya.

It’s strange to even think about it.

In the beginning, it seemed *impossible.*

Chuuya listens to The 1975 on holographic headphones, hands hidden in a vintage leather jacket. Dazai procrastinates until anxiety makes him retch and streams podcasts because he can’t sleep.

Chuuya rocks skin-tight vinyl pants that fit him like a glove, daring people to stare at his ass, knowing that a glass of wine will feed him the right confidence. Chuuya sings in Albatross’ band.

Dazai always drowned his non-feelings in a whiskey glass, picking a girl from the midst to ease up the knot in his stomach and the sensation of being the shell of a human.

Dazai always loved and hated and resented his best friend, but he wasn’t truly *attracted* to any other boy other than him.

But, most of all, Dazai Osamu thought he had gotten over his crush on Chuuya.

Clearly, he was wrong.

And look at him now: he’s done a marvelous job at jeopardizing their friendship.

He’s such an *idiot.*

His hands falter as he opens the umpteenth sugar pack and pours it into his coffee.
He was so lost in his head that, once arrived at the cafeteria, he forgot to order his reg — a vanilla latte, extra vanilla pump, cream — and got an americano.

An americano he’s now drawing in vanilla powder and sugar, even though it’ll still taste too bitter and watery, because he can’t endure

another interaction with the cashier without vomiting out that he's Dazai Osamu, and he betrayed his friend. His *best* friend.

The only boy he'll ever love.

As soon as he tastes the coffee, Dazai's entire face crumples up. He scurries back to the sugar counter, taking a handful of sachets before heading back to the table.

It's disgusting.

(Much like life without Chuuya.)

"Americano," a voice hums as he walks back. "That's Chuuya's order."

Almost pained, Dazai scoffs a laughter.

Of course Mitsuru, of all people, is early to their study group and waiting for him at the usual table.
She opens a laptop and a neatly organized purple notebook as Dazai takes his seat, humming an upbeat tune under her breath.

She left an empty chair between them, hoping that Akiko or Ranpo will fill the space — praying that their friends will, somehow, ease the awkwardness between them without asking questions.

Leaving behind her obsession with Fujiwara has done wonders to Micchan's complexion, Dazai thinks.
Unlike him, she looks like she's actually *sleeping*, for a change.
And he won't *say* that to her face, but maybe he could find someone better for her.

Odasaku, maybe.

"Bingo. Want some?" he drawls, mentally cursing when Mitsuru shakes her head in denial. "Wise choice. Chibi's taste is disgusting."

"Was that on purpose?"

Is she asking if he's heartbroken or just sleep deprived? *Really?*

"Absolutely not. This thing is horrible."

"Yet you remember his order and he has 'Samu." She rubs a hand over her face. "Damn, I can't believe I never noticed. Now it's *so* obvious."

"Is it?" He echoes, pretending her words don't make him feel like an

idiot.

“Did you hear from him?”

Dazai flinches, a little blindsided by the question, and he tries to tell himself it doesn’t hurt.

Should have he heard? Did she?

“God, he’s so dramatic,” Mitsuru murmurs when Dazai only answers her with a blank stare. “He texted that he’s with Tross and he’s doing fine, he just doesn’t want to talk to us. I guess he needs time, but I feel awful.”

Humming, Dazai wonders if she’s clinging to all their shared memories, trying to tell herself she wasn’t only a bad sister who accidentally dated her little brother’s crush.

She wasn’t only a bad sister, by the way.

Dazai knows it. The question is, does *she* know it?
After all, Mitsuru is dealing with a broken heart *and* a brother who won’t talk to her in the same week.

“Same,” he murmurs. “I feel bad.”

“I can see that. Brooding doesn’t suit you.”

“Wrong. Everything suits me,” he raises his cup towards the girl in a mock toast, taking a sip. It tastes foul, but he hopes the poker face can fool her. “It’s the curse of being my handsome, charming self.”

Liar. Do you know what suited you well? The way Chuuya looked at you like you meant something.

The way he might never *look at you again.*

“You know what doesn’t suit your handsome, charming self? Bullshit.”

“Leave me alone, Micchan.”

“Chuuya likes you.”

His eyebrows furrow. “I am *sure* Chuuya likes the idea of me being *away* from him,” he offers. “And it’s ok. Odasaku needs help to lecture anyway, so I’m keeping myself occupied.”

“You are ignoring the problem,” she says, then stops. “Don’t let him slip away again. Falling in love with my little brother can be a lot, Osamu. He asks for as much as he’s ready to give — and that’s *everything*. He’s loyal and honest and nurturing but demands the same. He takes after dad.”

He tuts. “Forgive me if I’m not here to hear you roast your brother.”

“I’m not.”

“And it’s too late anyw—“

She scoffs. “That’s my point, it’s *not*. What I want to say is that he is understanding, too. He’ll forgive you. You guys have too much history.”

You haven’t lost him.

And, God, wouldn’t Dazai like to believe that?
But the spark of hope kindled by the few, ravishing kisses they shared is wearing out with every day he doesn’t hear from Chuuya.

And the hurt in Chuuya’s eyes as he walked away—

“I don’t know.”

“Give him space, if you want, but don’t give up.”

“We fucked up, Micchan,” he murmurs.

“We did. But he’ll forgive you.” She nods, and Dazai is not sure who she’s trying to convince; him, or herself? “He *has* to.”

—

Phone calls give Sigma anxiety.

He is constantly praying work emails won’t find him at all, because they rarely find him well and *always* find him stressed. Corporate life sucks.

However, he especially dislikes the idea of having to arrange a quick, important call while he’s on his boyfriend’s lap.

A boyfriend Sigma has not seen in months, because he fucked off to Russia to take care of family business. Dating a photographer is hell.

Dating a photographer whose best friend is D.O.A's head stylist Fyodor *overworked overachiever* Dostoyevsky is even worse.

The fabric of Sigma's skirt brushes against Nikolai's hands, retreating up his thighs like low tide in the morning — pale lilac fabric against auburn skin, reddened with recent bruises and marks.

Keeping his cellphone on speaker in front of his mouth, but still perched on his boyfriend's lap, Sigma slaps away Nikolai's hand right before the call clicks through.

"Sig?"

In a world of assholes, Chuuya is *reliable.*

He always answers within the fourth ring, but today it took him five. Picking at his thumb, Sigma wonders if it's an ill omen.

"Hi, sweetheart."

"Is— Did something happen? I just left the set."

"I know," Sigma says.

"Did the client still need me? Is something wrong?" A pause. "Did I fuck up?"

Sigma takes a deep breath.
Amendment: Chuuya is reliable *and* anxious.

Nikolai noses the side of his cheek, puffing warm air agains his ear, and some of the tension melts under the encouragement. It's emboldening.

Hell, he thinks, what is he even wasting time for?

"It's all good," he says. "I need you to go to Paris."

There's a moment of silence. Then, a thud and a rustling sound as if Chuuya dropped the phone. Considering the muffled 'shit' that reaches Sigma, he probably did.

"W— wait? Are you kidding?"

"Not at all."

"Now?"

“Not like *now* now, but—“

“Hi, Chuuya,” Nik chimes in, leaning forward to get closer to Sigma’s phone. “You’re on speaker. You’re going to Paris and your assistant is coming with you. Say yes and cut it short, will you? We’re busy.”

It’s insane, how his boyfriend manages to shamelessly slither his way in any conversation — and how Sigma allows him to.
Chuuya stops at the other end of the call and, for a second, Sigma can *see* his blue eyes glare at him.

“Sigma…? Is Nikolai with you?”

“No, he recorded a sex toy with my voice,” Nikolai says.

“I would, if I could,” Sigma mumbles, just for the sake of Chuuya’s disgusted groan.

“Ew. Shut up,” he growls. “I didn’t know Nik was back.”

“St Petersburg was getting boring.”

“Aw, you’re sweet. You were missing Sigma.”

Nikolai’s head drops slightly, and his hand squeezes Sigma’s thigh from under the skirt. “Fair point.”

“Not the point of the call, guys. Look, Chuuya, I am sorry for the short turnaround on this one, but please understand my position. The client requested your team and I suspect your name was recommended to them, so we can’t say no.” A pause. *“Please* don’t say no.”

“What if I do say no?”

Well, damn.

“I won’t beg,” he clarifies. It’s gentle, but firm. It’s also a lie.

“I think you will. Sadly, I’m too tender-hearted to let you do that,” Chuuya says, a victorious grin in his voice. “What’s in it for me?”

“Fyodor,” Sigma allows, cautiously.

“Huh?”

“The styling and production are curated by D.O.A, which is why I think we *both* know who suggested your name. It’s the old New York

squad all over again." He can hear Chuuya stop breathing on the other side of the call, and Nikolai smiles. He's perfectly still, but every twitch of his erection against his ass makes Sigma want to drop the conversation and roll his hips and forget the world. Sadly, capitalism is a thirstier bitch than he is.
"Look. It's us, you, and Fyodor in Paris for a week. And you don't have plans, you told me that yourself."

"Well… It's kind of a dramatic time." He swallows. "I kissed my childhood best friend."

Sigma shoots Nik a glance, lips parted. Lifting a sardonic eyebrow, his boyfriend stares at him with a glint in his eye.
They are pale and beautiful, Nik's eyes, but Sigma has learned that the boy can be *unhinged* under the right circumstances.

And, right now, Nik's eyes are glittering with sharp interest at the news.

That is going to make things spicy.

"That sounds like a terrible decision," Sigma says, quietly. "You can tell me everything on the plane, then."

"Why do I have a feeling you guys are taking sides?"

"Nonsense," Sigma says.

He is *totally* taking sides: the one of whoever doesn't make Chuuya miserable.

A part of him hates how Chuuya stalls, pretending to be thinking over a once-in-a-lifetime job.
He can't understand it.
D.O.A is great for publicity, Chuuya's team needs to be oiled, and Paris? It's a no-brainer.

Plus Chuuya likes working with Fyodor. His styling gets Chuuya's vision, or whatever.

The only thing *Sigma* gets, personally, is that he caught the two checking each other out more times than his sanity cares to remember.
It's like finding out that mummy and daddy eye-fuck each other from across the room: uncomfortable, weird and a trauma he'd rather bury in the darkest drawers of his memory.

“Can I speak with HR?” Chuuya volleys back, playful annoyance laced in his voice. “I thought you were the nice one.”

“I *am* the nice one. I am the nicest boss, and I love you, and that is why I’m saying you can’t miss this.” With a sigh, Sigma adjusts himself on Nikolai‘s lap. “Just say yes. That way you can go back to your best friend, and *I* can get you a plane ticket.”

“You mean, you can go back to being dicked down on company hours?”

Sigma scoffs. It’s *high* time they close this conversation.

“Is that a yes?”

“Book me a room at the usual hotel. The nice one. And buy me a drink,” Chuuya says. “And we have a deal.”

—

It’s a Monday, and Chuuya hasn’t seen Dazai in seven days.

He hasn’t answered Mitsuru’s texts flooding his inbox either, no matter how often she asked to talk properly about what happened. He let her know he wasn’t dead, because he’s not *that* petty, and that he doesn’t hate her because she couldn’t *know,* but nothing more.

He has no more energy than that. He doesn’t want to talk to anybody unless he fixes things with Dazai first.

Things escalated to the point he hasn’t even replied to the pictures of Arahabaki in the family’s group chat.

At least, Mitsuru hasn’t shown up at The Old World either, and it’s annoying and reassuring at the same time.

He doesn’t want to see her, yet he should talk things out at least with his sister.

He will, he promises himself.

One step at the time.

For now, Chuuya takes a deep breath before turning the keys into the front door.

His own house feels foreign. He slips out of his boots and leaves them

in the genkan with the umbrella, letting the thought sink in: he's *home*.

Dazai is somewhere, too.

(Would this place even be *home* without Dazai?)

He steps in as if nothing changed at all, even if everything is hardly the same.

Because, now, Chuuya has a return ticket for Paris in two days and a stone pressing over his chest.

The house itself has not changed in the almost eight days has been out, even though part of him expected it to — which is dumb, he supposes, because there's no reason an argument and eight days in between should change a house.

The thing is, *he* changed.

His relationship with Dazai changed.

"Hey," he calls, dropping his bag to the floor.

It takes barely a second for Dazai to appear from the kitchen.

The boy is playing with the edge of his bandages, hooking his right-hand index under the gauze covering his left palm and tugging slightly. He always torments his gauze as if he could pick at his skin when he's nervous. He is wearing an oversized pink sweater with a T-Rex trying to open a fridge, and baggy jeans and loose bandages.

The comfy outfit seems to lure Chuuya in for a hug, and the redhead has to restrain himself from flying into Dazai's arms.

"Hey. I thought you were staying at Albatross."

"I texted," Chuuya says.

"Ah, yes. I did see your text. I got us takeout," Dazai says, mustering a smile. It still doesn't light up his eyes, pits of dark brown devoid of any light. "And I cleaned— well, I *stress* cleaned, actually. But I also assumed you'd change your mind and stay somewhere else."

He says it as if it's casual, as if it doesn't physically pull at the strings of Chuuya's heart.

The fact that *Dazai* anxiety-cleaned the entire house…

“Osamu, it’s ok,” he says, as tenderly as he can. “I’ll get over it, eventually.”

Dazai’s eyes widen as the faintest flash of surprise crosses his face.

“Oh.”

“Oh, what?”

“You used my name.”

Chuuya swallows, focusing on the mouthful of spit instead of the words he might vomit out.

Oda is right.

He likes Dazai, and he would use his name every day for the rest of their stupid lives if he could.

“You mentioned take-out,” he nudges, instead, waving the comment away. “So. What did you get us?”

Dazai smiles at the question, and a dimple opens on his right cheek and Chuuya’s heart trips over itself.

God, during the last week he almost forgot how beautiful Dazai is.

The smile is spontaneous, too, almost as if their fight never happened at all. Almost as if he never lied, and Chuuya never called him an unlovable piece of shit.

And, fifteen minutes later, sitting at the table in front of the Thai takeout from Chuuya’s favorite local restaurant, the redhead dares to hope that they *can* fix things.

Not tonight.
And he might still be a little angry once he leaves for Paris.

But he wants to *hope* that things can get better.

“You know,” Dazai starts, his voice quiet. He stops to pick a bite of chicken, leaving Chuuya waiting for him to continue. “The first summer after I transferred school, I joined the soccer club.”

Chuuya almost chokes on his Pad Thai.

“You? Were you drunk?”

“Surprisingly, no.”

“Then you were crazy,” he declares, a grin cutting his face.

Dazai was *never* a sportsperson.
He was always an I’ll-skip-PE person.

He *is* an I’ll-take-the-elevator-to-the-first-floor person.

“I hoped I would see Chibi at the regionals. But we didn’t qualify.” Dazai hmpfs, that little sound that is the audible trace of invisible scars. That trace of memories that still tingle, but didn’t leave a visible token of their presence. “I refused to cry. We lost because of the team’s incompetence, but still… It felt like my fault. Mori-san couldn’t talk to me for a week.”

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t all the team’s fault. You suck at soccer.”

Dazai scoffs. “Not the point.”

“And what’s the point?”

“That I wanted to see you. And I would do anything.”

Chuuya hmms, unsure of how to reply.

They quite obviously didn’t do enough, though.

In hindsight, he supposes, there were many ways to stay in touch: they gave up too soon, always expecting too much of the other.

Over time, they got too caught up in their existences to mind anything else.

Life ran faster than them, and they couldn’t keep up.
But they could have tried to stick together.

If he’s being honest, the certainty that they could have tried *harder* makes Chuuya want to headbutt the table.

“Then you could have answered my texts,” Chuuya says, fighting to keep his tone neutral. “You were always busy.”

“I was.”

“Like with my birthday party in middle school.”

“Ah, yes. I didn’t show up, did I?” Dazai murmurs.

Chuuya nods.

No, he didn’t show up.
Yes, like the earth sign that he is, Chuuya *remembers.*

It made him feel dumb for even trying — for telling everybody Dazai would come to him when the idiot didn’t. Even worse, Dazai barely texted at all, even after.

Mori wished him a happy birthday in Dazai’s stead, back then, stating that his son was too busy with his middle-school entrance exams. ‘Dazai-kun is aiming for an exclusive school, you know,’ he said, as if Chuuya gave a shit.

As if Chuuya, a pre-teen already angry at life itself, had the patience to wait for his best friend to be done studying and make some space for him.

Deep down, it always felt like an excuse.

Chuuya always appreciated that Dazai had found new friends, *smarter* friends, at his new school.

His best friend had forgotten about him.

“I’m sorry I stood you up, Chuuya. Mori was swamping me in extracurriculars,” Dazai explains, dragging his vowels as if he’s afraid of his own words. At least to Chuuya, though, his voice feels like fresh water over a festering, decade-old wound. “I never slept enough. Cram school, post-class study groups— I’m pretty sure no kid should start with coffee at ten years old, but I couldn’t keep up. I was the genius son. All I knew was that I had to live up to that standard.”

And you could have decided to not give up on me.

Dazai doesn’t say it, but Chuuya hears it. He does, and it mauls at him.

Why does it feel so important, now?

“I’m sorry, Osamu.”

“But then, when Mitsuru and I got back in touch, you were abroad

and… you always seemed too distant. I learned to be ok with that."

"You dated around a lot," Chuuya says.

He hates himself for making it sound like an accusation as he plays with the noodles in his box.

Dazai shakes his head. "Wrong. I fucked around a lot."

"Same thing."

"It's not, if you pay attention. I never committed."

Chuuya's grip over the chopsticks hardens. He hates how his blood boils. "You're being finicky."

"And you're not listening."

"Fuck's sake, 'you trying to make a point or what?"

"My point *is,* I never wanted to commit and you were right," Dazai says, cutting to the chase before they argue. *Again.* "You are right. I didn't make a move on you sooner and I would have if I had known then what I do now. But it always seemed enough, y'know? To be close to Chuuya as a friend."

Oh.

The boy stops chopsticks in mid-air, heart racing.

"Dazai—"

"I figured it would be enough." Then, Dazai smiles. It's distant, weakened by regret, and yet so very tender. Brown strands fall over his forehand, and he's avoiding Chuuya's gaze but Chuuya can taste *truth* in every word. "So I'm sorry, Chuuya."

Chuu-ya.

Only Dazai calls him like that, with a pause in between, as if he's carefully crafting the sound in his mind.

It's that soft, satin-like voice, half a murmur and half a quiet sound, that is typical of Dazai.

The deep, raw, hidden Dazai.

It's the voice that gets under Chuuya's skin.

Trying to steady his heart, throbbing rabbit-fast in his ribcage, Chuuya clicks his tongue. "Damn it. It's ok. I'm sorry too, for everything."

"Ok."

"I just wish you'd told me about Micchan."

Dazai sighs. "I know. Me too."

At that, Chuuya snorts— hating himself for all the time he lost. He sees Dazai's face and he loves every inch, yet some part of him can't get over the fact that Dazai lied. Mitsuru, too.

She is his sister, damn it.

"At least, you have an actual excuse," he growls, taking a mouthful of noodles. "I assumed a lot of things about you. And I never tried to tell you I had a crush on you because I didn't want to freak you out, and— that was dumb. And stupid. And I got truly jealous because I really, really like you." Chuuya scans Dazai's face, his pout softening as mirth dances on his face. Playful, without bite. *"And* you're a slut."

"Chuuya!"

"You are, though. Have you forgotten the Sakura incident?"

Dazai scrunches his nose.

However, Chuuya supposes that the Mackerel remembers how the redhead pushed him off the couch while he was napping, at the very least.

"You *really* need to move on."

"You grabbed me in your sleep and called me Sakura!"

Dazai shrugs the comment away with the utmost tranquility. "And as I explained, I was dreaming of a TV show."

"Sure."

"Bold of you to assume I remember those girls' names."

Chuuya's mouth hangs open. "Are y— You're such an asshole."

This time, Dazai lifts his head and shoots him a smile, a full-teeth, proud one. “Thanks!” he chirps, and Chuuya rolls his eyes.

He can’t believe he has a crush on this… train wreck of a fuckboy.
He can’t believe he loves this soft-hearted asshole. It’s the same boy who was dating his sister.

He guesses Dazai fits his type, though.

Chuuya always had a thing for fucked-up, fuck-your-brains-out-in-and-out-of-bed fuckboys.

Too many fucks in a single type of personality.
That’s probably why that specific type of boy either turns out to be a player or an absolute disappointment.

Just look at *them*.

“But I thought you changed for Mitsuru,” Chuuya murmurs.

He really thought Dazai would become a better person for his sister.

Dazai’s smile drops. “For the record, I would change for her. She deserves a good guy, and I love her.” He hesitates. “I love her like I love Odasaku. Not like *I…like* Chuuya.”

Chuuya’s heart stutters.

Not how I like Chuuya, he said. Yet, for a moment, he was sure the word ‘love’ rested on the tip of Dazai’s tongue.

“So you *like* me,” he murmurs.

“I do.”

“I like you too,” he says. Weak, *tentative*. The mere sound of his own voice sets fire to his cheeks. “Ah. Right. I’m also going to Paris.”

It takes him a moment to realize he blurted out about Paris to exorcise the blush crawling up his neck, and that it came out *wrong*.

As if somebody has blown over a candle behind his eyes, a light winks out in Dazai’s brown irises.

He scowls.

“Like, are you running away to Paris, or…?”

“No, dumbass — it’s work, one week. I leave in two days.”

“Oh, ok,” Dazai says, a little more relieved this time. “That’s nice. It sounds like a good opportunity.”

I will miss you, Chuuya thinks. He thinks it before he can stop himself, and despite the fact that he’s not sure Dazai deserves to hear it just yet.

He still likes Dazai despite their recent arguments.

Most of all, he wants to kiss him *despite* everything.

Fidgeting with the chopsticks, not picking up any food, Chuuya lets put a soft noncommittal noise.

“I think so too. And when I’m back we can kind of… decide what we want to do? Maybe?”

“We can go to the Cosmo Clock 21.”

Chuuya’s heart drums in his chest. “To do what? Watch the skyline at night?”

“Precisely,” Dazai says, with a serious edge in his voice. Chuuya tries not to be touched by the fact that it’s the date he always wanted, and Dazai *listened*. “We will watch the skyline and have a nice dinner. And I can make it up to Chuuya.”

—

I was swamped in extracurriculars.

How the fuck is he supposed to tell Chuuya he skipped his birthday party because he was in the hospital? That he fell off everybody's radar because of something Mori could not admit out loud?

He was a child.

He wanted to die.

He still does.

He—

—

Sitting so close to his best friend after kissing him is *weird.*

Sitting next to Chuuya while watching a TV show that decided it was a great moment for a sex scene is *a whole new* level of weirdness.

Now, Dazai is a proud fuckboy.

He's been in worse situations. Shameless is his middle name. People widely hate and envy him for his nonchalance in jumping from relationship to relationship, never calling back, flirting with those same people he ghosted— and *yet.*

Funnily enough, he can't even breathe next to Chuuya, his body twitching weirdly whenever he even considers the possibility of sliding closer.

He can't think of anything but the kisses.

He wants Chuuya to touch him again — and *not* as a friend.

The only idea glues Dazai's tongue to his suddenly-dry palate.

Instead, they sit stiffly next to each other on the sofa, a pillow between them as if to prevent their bodies from touching and a loud sex scene on the screen.

Dazai keeps his eyes stubbornly peeled on the TV, painfully aware of every breath that leaves his lungs.

Fuck, he thinks, cheeks on fire and hands stiff on his knees.

He's not sure where he's supposed to look — at the TV, and the actors quite obviously humping each other?
At Chuuya?

What if it'll imply…?

Fuck.

"Dazai?"

"What?" He snaps back, on autopilot.

Chuuya scrunches his nose.

“I wanted to ask you if you were alright since you look like you’re having a goddamn allergy reaction, but screw you, I guess.”

“Huh, no. I’m fine.”

Blue eyes scan his face. “You are purple.”

Plastering a smirk on his face is an exercise in self-control, and Dazai is *quite* sure he deserves an academy award for it.

“I was worried Chuuya can’t watch those PG-13 images.”

“Ha?!”

“You know—“ He grins. “Because you’re as short as a kid~”

“I will show you short!”

“Huh-uh. Can you ever reach me, with those short arms and leggies of yours?”

“Wanna see?! I’ll beat you up.”

“Uh, scary~ Like you beat up that asshole Riichi?” he taunts, eyes gleaming.

It sounds like an invitation, a challenge.

With a feral grin, Chuuya lurches forward. He tosses the pillow on the ground and reaches for Dazai’s sides — fingers arched like claws, aiming for the tender spots where he knows Dazai is most sensitive, ready to tickle him until he eats his words and begs for mercy.

Not that Dazai has any intention of begging.

He pushes away, his back against the armrest.

He grabs Chuuya’s wrists, trying half-heartedly to wrestle him away as the redhead slips on his lap. His fingers scratch Dazai’s hips, his nails meet fresh bandages, but the shivers that shake the brunet are all but because he’s ticklish.

Then, their gazes lock.

The shift between brawl and something *else* clicks in, sneaking up on them both.

Instead of fighting Chuuya, all of a sudden, Dazai *opens* for him.

There's no reason.

It just *happens.*

Dazai blocks the smaller body in his arms, and their faces are close. A breath catches between them, trapped in between their lips.

In a moment that seems to stretch forever, Dazai brushes his nose against Chuuya's — almost to ask for permission.

Then, lingering a breath away from the redhead's lips, he lets Chuuya grab his shirt and pull him forward.

Dazai hooks his free hand on the back of the other's neck, pressing him closer, locking their lips together— closing any distance between them, even if there is no distance left at all.

It's a 'one more minute, one more time, one more *chance'* kind of kiss.

Chuuya chuckles against Dazai's mouth, stunned and thawing like snow under a summer sun.
He also yields under the contact, angling his head, and this time there's no hunger as he nibbles at Dazai's bottom lip, dragging an inaudible sigh out of the brunet.

And he can't *believe* his luck, he truly can't.

He can't believe he is sitting with his back against the armrest and Chuuya is straddling him, and his hands are cupping Dazai's face and his lips are kissing his mouth.

Gentle.
So, *so* gentle.

This must be it, Dazai thinks. He's found it.

A good reason to keep living for a little while longer.

And it's *odd* to kiss Chuuya with unhurried tenderness after everything that happened.

It's odd to have the time to feel skin, to kiss Chuuya without the usual devouring need.

Unlike the other times, love feels warm and gentle — like the morning

sunlight peeking from the window, invisible but present.

With the tip of his finger, Dazai traces the features he remembers so well; Chuuya's nose, sprayed with the subtlest freckles, his parted lips, the tiny valley of his chin.

He looks at him and Chuuya stares back, almost waiting; breath frozen, eyes open. He's gone silent under Dazai's lips.

The room is so quiet, Dazai can feel their heartbeats thumping and their eyelashes flickering.
They sound like butterfly wings in the silence.

"Chuuya—"

"I don't want to go to Paris," the other whispers. He can feel the words, with his finger still resting on Chuuya's bottom lip. The damp puffs of breath ghost over his hand. "I want to stay here forever." He stops and, when he talks, he's slightly choked: "I *missed* you."

God, Dazai thinks. Me too.

After spending his life missing Chuuya, now he would gladly spend the month under the soft weight of the other's body.

"I missed you too. But you really should go," he whispers back.

The thing is, though, he doesn't want Chuuya to go either.
He wants to sleep with the redhead and get almost kicked off the bed and poke at his teeth because the redhead sleeps with his mouth open like a beautiful yet dumb fish.

He wants to fall asleep lulled by his soft snoring, by the stupid things Chuuya hums in his dreams.

With a wail, lacing his hands around Dazai's neck, Chuuya leans forward and hides his face in the tousled mess of brunet hair.

"No way. I can stay here. Fuck work." A pause, and Chuuya's breath tickles Dazai's neck. "Will you hide me from Sigma?"

"Hmm, it depends..."

A soft gasp. "On *what?"*

"Is Chuuya okay with skipping a fully expensed trip in his favorite city?"

“Maybe,” he mumbles.

“And I’ll be here when you’re back,” Dazai whispers.
It’s a promise for both of them.

“…Right.”

“And you *like* your work.”

“Shit. I thought you were trying to convince me to cook crab for you, but you’re making good points,” Chuuya says with a pout. “I hate that you are right, for the record.”

“Plus Chuuya has to work so we can both live here,” Dazai provides, voice low and tender. “Speaking of which, do you want to sleep in my room tonight? Not to do anything, just to talk. And sleep.”

As he thinks it over for a moment, Chuuya pulls away. Then he smiles, blue eyes clear and unreadable, and his fingers travel over Dazai’s skin — his cheeks, his lips, his neck.

They never linger on a spot for too long, unhurried travelers eager to feel more skin. Then, he gently drives a strand of hair behind Dazai’s ear.

“Only if I can—“

“Sleep with your back to the door?” Dazai interjects. He’s whispering. *Why* is he whispering? Have they screamed too much at each other lately. He wonders if Chuuya, too, is tired of fighting.

“Yeah.”

“You truly never change.”

“Ugh. Shut up.” Chuuya leans forward, and his voice dips. “Do it again?”

It’s a shy request, murmured in between them as he leans forward.

It’s an invite.

It’s a prayer let out around a smirk that is coy and sheepish in equal parts, and that’s *all* Chuuya has to ask for Dazai to kiss him again. He kisses him with the unspoken oath he will *never* let go unless Chuuya wants him to.

“We’re idiots,” Chuuya says, slightly out of breath, hands sinking in the soft mass of Dazai’s hair.

“Yes,” he breathes out.

Another kiss. “We wasted so much *fucking* time,” the redhead whispers against his mouth.

By now Dazai is not *sure* he’s understanding the words, though.

Every cell in his body is focused on the kiss, on Chuuya’s body under his hands.

“Yes,” he still says, as an encouragement.

It works, because Chuuya kisses him again.
And *again.*

His slacks are growing more uncomfortable as the kiss deepens, and Chuuya’s fingers rub circles in his scalp.

The friction between their bodies sends a shiver down Dazai’s spine, unexpected.

He never found true intimacy in a bed, always searching for skin-on-skin contact without ever finding anything meaningful, and now he feels naked, *excited* despite the layers of clothes.

His body is coming alive under the most innocent of kisses.

“And you are…” Chuuya’s voice trails off, the ghost of a giggle in it. Delighted. Inviting.

Dazai cranes his neck to nibble at his bottom lip, playfully.

“Yes.”

“Do you want—“

Chuuya is about to add more when something vibrates between them, causing Dazai to flinch.

It takes him a moment of puzzled surprise to realize the vibration comes from Chuuya’s pocket, and that the redhead has slipped the phone out with a pout.

However, the interruption bursts the bubble of intimacy around them,

reminding Dazai of their surroundings — the TV, the dishes, the echo of the neighbors walking in the corridors outside.

And they *are* running a bit too fast.

Maybe it's not too bad that Chuuya is forced to pull away, eyes darkened, looking apologetic as he frowns at the phone's screen.

"Huh, sorry," Chuuya says. "Work. I gotta take this one."

With a soft humming sound, Dazai nods.

It's a good thing they stopped, he tells himself.

(Is it? *Is* it a good thing?)

Closing the door behind him, Chuuya takes the call in his bedroom.

He drops onto his bed, which remained exactly as he left it eight days before, lifting the cell phone to his ear.

It's not that he doesn't want Dazai to hear, but—

"I heard you accepted the offer," a voice greets him.

Low, but sweet, Japanese bastardized with the ghost of an accent.

Listening to Fyodor is like listening to a lullaby.

Somehow, all of Chuuya's best and worst work-related memories start when D.O.A's youngest head of styling department, cello-prodigy, dark-prince-who-may-or-may-not-have-Romanov-DNA Fyodor calls him.
Working with Fyodor has always been the highest peak in Chuuya's CV.

Because of him, right now, his existence is also miserable.

However, he'd rather die than let Fyodor know he cockblocked him and Dazai.
Dazai.
The same 'Samu Fyodor hated in grade school.
Fyodor is never going to let him live, if he finds out he and Dazai are more than friends.

(If he finds out? *When?)*

With a sigh, the redhead moves his phone to the other ear, running a hand through his hair.

He's still a bit breathless from before, but part of him is glad Fyodor interrupted him and Dazai.

He's buying time.

Why is he buying time?

"Yeah, I accepted it."

"I'm happy you did," Fyodor says, and it sounds unfairly true. "We'll work well. I was worried you would refuse."

"It's kinda hard to say no to Sigma." He scrunches his nose, realizing the meaning behind his words the moment he says them. It just clicks. "Which is why you made him call and didn't ask me yourself. Fuck. You're an ass."

"I know what I want."

"And *I* suddenly want to add bleach to your shampoo."

"You are very welcome to try, see how that works." A pause. "I just wanted to say that I'll send the brief tomorrow. And that I look forward to seeing you, Chuuya."

Tragically enough, Chuuya does too.

Truth is, he hasn't seen Fyodor since New York and he misses his not-quite-friend. Unlike Dazai, he supposes, Fyodor has been a more or less steady presence in Chuuya's life ever since kindergarten, and he likes working with him.

They work in the same field and deal with the same insane people.

Plus, he can't believe *the* Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who would unironically put a cellphone in the microwave to avoid calling and to be called, just rang him to say he looks forward to a reunion.

"If the job is boring, I'll beat you three up," he says, sprawling himself on the bed and glancing at the ceiling.
He's not *ready* to spend a week in a hotel when he just got home.

"When have I ever offered you a boring job, Chuuya?" Fyodor replies — voice low and endearing.

Fyodor didn't say 'D.O.A.' offered you a job, and it sounds… allusive.

It sounds *dirty* in a way that makes the redhead's heart miss a beat.

It causes him to swallow dry.

"I have a boyfriend," Chuuya spews. It's impulsive, and he regrets the comment as soon as the words leave his mouth.

Ah, fuck.

Why did he think of adding that? God, why is he such a loser?
He slept with Fyodor once, and Paris will be a professional setting. They are going to *work*.

He is the one making it awkward by stating he has a boyfriend as if Fyodor just handed him a condom and asked him to pick a flavor of lube.

Fyodor got him a *gig,* for fuck's sake. There's nothing allusive in that — unless Chuuya wants it to be. And he doesn't.

It's not even true that he has a boyfriend, because Dazai is not his boyfriend.

Chuuya does *not* have a boyfriend.
All he has is a friend that he kissed exactly a grand total of three times and who lied to his face.

A friend Chuuya was more than happy to fuck as of five minutes ago.

A friend he is in love with. And he doesn't want Fyodor to get ideas, not even *remotely,* for that friend's sake. He knows Dazai enough to know he might get insecure, so he will shut any conversation about past adventures before they happen.
Because he and Dazai just got back to a sense of peace, and Chuuya is *not* risking that.

"A boyfriend?"

"Hm-m."

"I see. How lovely. And I have a new pet rat named Rodion Raskolnikov," Fyodor says. He sounds *sure* his rat will outlive Chuuya's relationship. "Seems like we have lots to catch up on."

I look forward to seeing you.

Chapter 8: Two Ships Passing In the Night

Chapter Summary

Dazai organizes one last date before Chuuya leaves for Paris.

“I’m going to take off these bandages.”

Chapter Notes

Major major MAJOR thanks to Nina for listening to me and helping me feel less insecure about this chapter. It would have rotten forever if it weren’t for you □❤□

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Papa chewed my head off because of what happened.”

And so it begins.

“Yeah, they weren’t happy with me either,” Chuuya says, crossing his legs.

The distressed jeans he’s wearing bite at his thigh, bare skin rubbing against the fabric as he crosses his legs again. He can’t *stop* moving. To make the predicament even more uncomfortable, he is definitely underdressed for the fancy café Mitsuru picked, in his ratty hoodie and skinny jeans.
But he’s coming straight from a TV set and every *inch* of his body is hollering for caffeine and three months of sleep.

Once he arrived, Mitsuru had already ordered him a tall americano.

They have to talk — about Dazai, about *them* and the mess they made. About Fujiwara, perhaps.
When Chuuya straight-up asked her about what happened, Mitsuru stared daggers at him and declared she would rather avoid discussing pieces of shit while drinking a perfectly good coffee. It ruined her day.
Chuuya never tried to bring up the topic again.

“I think I’m grounded,” she complains. “And Paul grounded me! Can you believe it? I thought he was the *fun* dad!”

Chuuya hums. “Yeah, we fucked up.”

“They never grounded me before.”

The despair woven in her tone makes Chuuya grin, despite everything that happened. It reminds him of the days when they would butt heads all the time and find it unthinkable to be fighting over the same boy.
He guesses they both got their knacks for melodrama from Verlaine.

“Did you tell the old men you’re well past seventeen?”

“Yeah.” Mitsuru shakes her head, waving the comment away. Locks of maple-red hair frame her cheeks with the movement, bouncing oh so lightly. “They say it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s your fault for telling them what happened.”

“I had to. I felt like shit.” She gnaws at her bottom lip. Her eyes find Chuuya, although she seems hesitant to meet his gaze. “I’m sorry, Chuuya. Truly sorry.”

He shrugs it off. “It’s alright.”

“It’s *not* alright. Please accept this coffee as an apology.”

“Oh, shut up. I can pay for my own shitty coffee,” he says, glancing at the ceiling — but he’s smiling.

She scrunches her nose, looking at the tall takeaway cup in front of Chuuya. “Oh, I *know* you can. I know your gigs pay well while Odasaku feeds me on a daily basis, and that you’re *‘the shit, and all that and more* while I’m a terrible older sis and a tone-deaf imbecile. So you will *please* accept this coffee because that’s what I can afford.”

Stifling a giggle into a sip of coffee, Chuuya pretends to think over her words. He has to give her credit for groveling, at least. “Hm.
You *were* pretty tone deaf…”

“And you really don’t have to get me anything in Paris, I promise. Not even a small designer lipstick.”

“I wasn’t gonna do that anyway,” he hums, tilting his head as if to evaluate the bargain. It’s all teasing, though.

“Please, don’t make me beg.”

Chuuya scoffs a chuckle.

He is *fine,* really.

To be honest, all he wants is to move on and smash Fujiwara's face for his sister's sake. They played a dumb game and got burned, but it wouldn't be the first time. They're ok. They are *family.*
If anything, the misunderstanding made him wonder why he had to hide.

Why did he keep his feelings a secret, when it would have been so much *simpler* to trust Mitsuru?

"Look, it's ok. What happened between you and Dazai…" Chuuya hesitates, wetting his lips. It's hard to talk now, shame drying out his mouth. It's hard to voice out his feelings — it's just not something he *does.* He never learned how. "I guess it's on me, too. I could have been honest, instead of sulking and acting like a passive-aggressive moron."

"But I could have picked up the signals."

"Yes, you could have. And I could have spelled out that I never got over my crush on Dazai."

For a long moment, Mitsuru's eyes rest on him. They're warm and sad. *Ah,* he thinks: Micchan is trying to understand when it all derailed. "I should have known you were still pining over Dazai when you slept with that Russian guy," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Emotionally remote, hot men who look like they pay taxes with an Uno Reverse card? He and Dazai are *basically* the same person."

As his mouth wrinkles in a pout, Chuuya waves the comment away and decides he won't take the bait. Those two are not the same person, most definitely, but he'll admit he might have a type.
Mitsuru has a point, and it's not like he never thought about it. His one-night stand with Fyodor was a fortuitous accident in a time of his life peppered with too many risks and numbed by too many bottles of wine. Yet, it might have been one of the most honest decisions of his entire existence.
He knew what he wanted — and what was available, and what was beyond his grasp.

Which makes admitting it to Dazai even *harder.*

Part of Chuuya doesn't want to ruin Paris for himself, either. He's there to *work,* not flirt or worry about boys.

"If Fedya pays taxes with an Uno Reverse card, so does Sigma," he says.

"Bold of you to assume *Angel Face* pays taxes at all." Mitsuru rolls her eyes, leaning her cheek on her closed fist. Her voice dips, and her lips curl, and all of a sudden she seems sorry for everything that happened. "Look, jokes aside — I should have been there for my baby brother. You'll always come first, before any other boyfriend."

"Yeah, *but* I honestly thought Dazai made you happy," he hums, glancing down at his coffee. It sounds like an excuse, because the truth is that he didn't want to admit he liked Dazai and Dazai liked *her.* "I really did."

"He does make me happy. Not in that way, though."

"Well, no shit, sorry for not noticing the *nuances* while I had my head up in my ass."

"We're really stupid, huh?" She says, offering him a smile. It's a coy, apologetic smirk, an *attempt* at peace, but it lights up her face from within and Chuuya can only return it — a slightly more encouraging smirk, reinforced by a nod.

God, he thinks. They *were* tremendously stupid.

"We sure are."

"And, for the record, Dazai is just a friend."

"But you had just broken up with *Jackass-Who-Shan't-Be-Named,* so I thought…I mean, I thought you were having *fun."*

Immediately, her lips curl down into a scowl. "Oh, no," she says, retracting a little against the chair. "That is also why I was comfortable asking Dazai specifically, and not Odasaku or 'Tross or anyone. Like, Dazai is that one friend who is hot but that I would never date for real."

"Why?" Chuuya catches himself asking.

He knows he'll regret it. Still, he asks it anyway because he's a helpless *idiot.*

For a long moment, glancing around, Mitsuru balances her answer. Her eyebrows furrow ever so slightly, almost touching above the bridge of her nose as she weighs her next words.

“You wanna know my, like, honest opinion?” She asks, prompting Chuuya to nod. “Dazai once said to me he wasn’t *made* for relationships and wasn’t looking for one. Like, ever. Girls like me know to steer clear of boys like him. You’ve got to be very dumb or very, very, very in love to fall for someone like Dazai.” Her head falls a little, and she hides her pout into the rim of her latte. “I never saw him with a girl he *liked* before. ‘Guess we know why now.”

“I assumed he was straight,” Chuuya replies. “Like, hard-line straight. Highway straight.”

“Didn’t we *all.”*

“So… he’s not made for relationships, huh.”

For what feels like a lifetime, Mitsuru ponders over an answer. “That’s what he said. But I think he adores you, Chuuya — maybe he even loves you.”

As her voice trails off, almost in a haze, her eyes wander to the cafe. Chuuya is glad for the moment of distraction, squirming in his seat as a wave of heat creeps up his face.

Dazai could love him, he repeats to himself. Dazai may love him. How absurd it sounds, how foolish, how wonderfully *dreamy*.

“Shut up,” he groans. “He doesn’t.”

“I don’t know. I’m just telling you what I see.”

“So you’re saying he’s in love with me or some shit?”

“I’m saying Dazai cares about you. *Duh.* Still, I saw him sleeping around for all these years, too.” Her lips retreat in a sharp line, the fading trace of her lip gloss shining under the lights of the cafe. Pink rose. She’s always used that shade, ever since high school. “You *must* consider that what Riichi said at the party is not completely wrong.”

“Oi—”

“And, also, Riichi is an asshole and I hope he rots,” Mitsuru interrupts,

lifting a hand. “That said, I saw enough of Dazai’s messes to say I wouldn’t date him for real, personally, because he’s not worth the risk. Now, I suspect *your case* will be different, but—”

Hesitantly, Chuuya bobs his head, hoping she won’t notice how his leg bounces under the table.

“But?”

“But as I said, you'll always come first. This is what I honestly think, and I’m only saying it because you asked.”

Slowly, he nods.

If he’s being honest, he knows Dazai is *committed* to the fuckboy role.

Chuuya has lived with him for six months now, and he’s not an idiot. He saw Dazai flirt with random girls at the supermarket, and at house parties, and at the laundromat that one time their washing machine vomited soap all over their bathroom, and at school and on the internet.
He’s *seen* where Mitsuru is coming from.

Yet— Dazai loves him. Well. Not exactly. He *might* love him, according to Mitsuru.
And Chuuya sure as fuck won’t ask him directly because he’s not that masochistic yet, but the consciousness is enough to set off fireworks in his chest. He doesn’t want to hear anything else.

He wants to *believe* it.

She swallows. “I just wanna see you happy.”

“I know.”

“So…” She leans in, and her expression changes. A grin stretches on her lips, and her eyes glisten as she looks for Chuuya. Mitsuru can sniffgossip like a bloodhound, always could. “Off to more important details. Is our dear Dazai a good kisser?”

For a moment, Chuuya’s mind just goes blank. “Huh?”

“You and Dazai kissed, you moron. Tell me everything.”

Oh, we did more, Chuuya’s treacherous brain provides.
The memory of Dazai’s hands on him, his weight pressing him down, his mouth skimming over the sensitive skin of Chuuya’s wrist — it all

drags shivers down his tailbone.
He remembers Dazai's teeth biting his bottom lip, nibbling at it; he remembers Dazai whispering things to him, things that caused his blood to run thicker and slower in his veins.

Still, he puts on a deadpan face. He *tries* to.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Liar!" Mitsuru cries, full of glee. It's loud enough for Chuuya to sink a little deeper in his chair, shielding his face with a hand as some customers from the nearby tables turn to glance at him. "Oh my gosh, you two *did* more! How was it?"

Why, that is a brilliant question. Too bad Chuuya is not sure he *can* answer.

There are a hundred things he could say now. Their kisses were soft and heated and hungry and all the things in between. It was a *lot.* And most of all, it was—

"It was weird," he says.

"Weird?"

"Yeah."

"Elaborate," she orders.

God, he wishes he could find the words.

"I want to smash his face and kiss him at the same time. He's so complicated— so unnecessarily complicated all the time. And he's so smug and so annoying and so beautiful," Chuuya says. He only realizes the vulnerability of his admission because of the wild glimpse in Mitsuru's eye. He scowls, rubbing his nape. "Damn, that idiot. He pisses me off."

"Sure he does."

Chuuya stops, flashing her a disapproving glare. "If you have to be like that, I'm not gonna say anything else."

Grinning from ear to ear, Mitsuru ignores him. "I just think you are adorable. Which base are you on?"

"The one called *none of your damn business,"* Chuuya answers,

immediately. Heat crawls up his cheeks, and he can feel his neck burn. "But yeah. He's a good kisser, I would assume. I suppose that the fact that I want to kiss him every second that I don't *actually* want to punch him helps— he's very kissable. And very punchable."

"Hm-m."

"Definitely more punchable than kissable."

"Sure, Chuuya. Try that again without the starstruck voice."

"I mean it. But… I guess I need to collect more evidence on how kissable he actually is."

With a giggle, Mitsuru reaches for his hand above the table, grasping his fingers encouragingly. As their hands touch, a nameless burden in Chuuya's chest thaws.
He smiles, and his sister smiles *with* him. "Of course you do. And, after Paris, you two lovebirds will have all the time in the world," she says, a complicit lilt in her voice.

It implies *so* many things, that voice.

It's a 'tell me everything' and 'I've got your back' and 'I'm sorry we couldn't talk more about how disgustingly whipped you are'.

It means *I miss you.* And Chuuya— Gosh, he might be a moron and an idiot whipped for a *Mackerel,* but he missed her too.
He missed doing shots, the makeup sessions before a gig at the Old World, the screaming matches and the fights and the lazy weekends at their parents' home.
He missed his sister, his best ally.

For the first time in a very, very long while, he reminds himself that he still has Mitsuru in his corner. They're fine.
They're *still* family.

They bounced back.

—

When Dazai said that he had two tickets for a Kurosawa rerun in a cinema close to their house, Chuuya didn't hesitate a second to say yes with his full lungs.
Which is something, since he hates Kurosawa.

Sacrifices must be made, though. Chuuya might not be excited about the movie itself *(The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* is not exactly The Avengers, right?), but he only cares about being with Dazai on his last day before flying to Paris.

He wants to have a single, silly, almost-date with his almost-boyfriend — definition to be confirmed, hence the 'almost'.
He can't believe he won't see Dazai for a full week.

Which is why he is ignoring the occasional stares from people while he's waiting in front of a modest local cinema in a T-shirt and black corset and leather jacket. He threw in a choker and a pearl necklace just to live a little.
In hindsight, maybe he *did* go a tad overboard, but it feels good to make an effort if the person deserves it. Besides, pearls and corsets are underrated.
Chuuya made it his life's mission to wear them often, and rock them always.

Too bad all that effort might be for nothing, because it's way past three, and the movie is about to start. Clicking his tongue, Chuuya glances at his phone for the umpteenth time, checking the hour.
Part of him wonders if he's been stood up because Dazai is – *shocker* – a no-show.

Maybe he's not coming.
Maybe Chuuya will have to go home and kick his ass.

Maybe he changed his mind about the movie. Maybe Dazai changed his mind about *them.* It's their first true date, after all; plenty of time to get cold feet.

He's almost about to regret the invite, and trying so hard and being so *dumb,* when somebody taps his shoulder.

"Chuuya~"

Ah. Here he is.

Instantly, Chuuya's mind slows down.

"Oi, late for your Kurosawa marathon, Mackerel?" He greets, his lips twitching into a grin as he turns. "Unbelievable."

Chuuya doesn't know what kind of greeting he expected, but it was certainly *not* Dazai giving him a bewildered stare. For a second, he

wonders if he forgot to wear pants.
Before he can ask what the *fuck* is going on, Dazai's jaw drops and his voice hiccups. “Yeah,” he wheezes out, eyes so wide they seem about to roll out of his skull. “Sorry I was—“ his voice trails off. “Kept. At uni. Overtime.” He swallows. “Because Odasaku needed things.”

“Things,” Chuuya echoes.

“Yes. Things.”

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah. I’m—“ He licks his lips. “Perfectly fine.”

Which is *obviously* bullshit, because Dazai's face is sporting a shade between pink and *purple.*
Chuuya scowls, taking a step forward.

“Do you have a fever, ya idiot? I’m not gonna fly out if I catch the flu from you—” When he moves forward to touch Dazai’s forehead, though, the other back steps. It’s almost *violent.* Chuuya stops, too, brain running a hundred miles per hour in front of the rejection. It gives him whiplash. “Huh… Did I do something wrong?”

“It’s just—“ Dazai’s voice dies again in a wheeze, trailing off. When he swallows and turns his head, covering his mouth with one hand, Chuuya’s brain explodes with worry. What the fuck did he do, now. How did he fuck this up before they even start? “It’s *just—”*

“What, Dazai?”

“You look way too hot for a cinema date. I wasn’t prepared,” Dazai says, then. He sounds a little like Chuuya slapped him just by *existing,* awe and surprise mixing in his voice. “And the pearls and the—" He hesitates, as if he could combust just by thinking the word. Then, almost a murmur: “I like the corset.”

After the first moment of surprise, Chuuya snickers and motions as if to tip his invisible hat. “Why, the Mackerel likes what he sees?”

“Chuuya~“

“No, no, please, do tell me more. I didn’t peg you for the corset kind of guy.”

Dazai nods, a little shy of desperate in a way that seems almost

comical to Chuuya. Rewarding and flattering, definitely, but *funny*.
"It's a recent discovery." His eyes darken, dropping on Chuuya's collarbone exposed by his low V-neckline and corset — taking it all in, breath hissing. "And by recent, I mean *now.*"

He licks his lips, saying that, and suddenly Chuuya feels seen in a voyeuristic kind of way. He's stripped bare, admired, *wanted.*
It's not bad. It's just intense.
Then, Dazai deadpans. "Let's go home."

"What?!"

"Screw the movie. I need to get my hands on you."

After a moment of bewilderment, Chuuya's wolfish smile stretches. "Ah-a, no way. We've got the tickets."

Dazai lets out a dragged-out whimper. "You don't even *like* Kurosawa!"

Which is fair, and he doesn't, but he knows Dazai was looking forward to the movie: that alone is reason enough to stay. "It's not good to throw money down the drain," he replies, with a tut. "Good boys must wait until *after* the movie."

Then, he means, *I'll let you touch anything you want.*

Considering the little hmpf-sound that comes from Dazai, the afternoon is going to be surprisingly amusing.
Besides, he supposes that a thing for boys in corsets is always a good discovery – *especially* when they're about to step into a dark room. No one ever said they couldn't get a little *distracted.*

Despite his smugness, though, Chuuya flinches when Dazai grabs his hand, interlacing their fingers as he marches into the cinema.

As they get food, his hand trapped Dazai's own, Chuuya allows himself to relax.
Cinema-and-hand-holding is a kind of date he hasn't had in ages, the kind of date guys stopped proposing to him after high school. Yet, to Chuuya, this one feels like the very first meaningful cinema date of his life.
There's something boyish, something innocent about it.
If they both manage to keep their hands to themselves, that is.

It's way too easy to let his mind fantasize about the things

they could do in the darkness of the cinema, with Dazai next to him and a giant bowl of popcorn to share in between them.
It's easy to wonder about the beautiful thing they could have been if Dazai had stayed and Chuuya had reached out.

They could have been teenagers making out in the back rows, throwing popcorn at each other.

They could have been young and dumb. Instead, they are *not* so young and still very much dumb, but together at last in a nearly full house for an old black-and-white movie.

They sit a little too close, hands brushing whenever they rummage in the popcorn and feet bumping into each other.

Caught in his thoughts, Chuuya almost yelps out loud when the back of Dazai's hand touches his thigh.
Freezing, he almost chokes on a swallow as Dazai's damp breath fans over his skin.

Shit, he thinks. *Fuck.*
He sure is forward, huh? Damn.

Because Dazai is *really* getting closer. The idiot wasn't kidding about getting handsy.

Wetting his lips, Chuuya glances to the side and adjusts in his seat as Dazai leans on his shoulder. He's so close.
He's so goddamn *bold.*
Chuuya can smell the shampoo they share – the one he bought and Dazai has *stolen.* He can sense Dazai's favorite lavender detergent on his light sweater.

Lavender calms him down, Dazai always says.

Well, Chuuya is pretty sure he would need a *truck* of *damn* lavender now, because his heart is racing out of control.
He almost cusses out loud when Dazai murmurs his name — Ch-u-ya, dragging the u and exhaling out the last sound almost in a *moan.*
Holy shit.
The sudden weight makes him shiver, with Dazai's lips tickling his neck and the tip of his nose brushing his skin.

Heartbeat drumming in his throat, Chuuya turns toward the other.

"Oi, Dazai, at least wait—?"

No answer.
Dazai's breath deepens, if anything, and he nuzzles closer. His hand slips a little further, brushing the hem of Chuuya's slacks.

"'Samu?"

Chuuya pokes his shoulder, but the other doesn't budge.
He only hums, absently, cuddling closer.

Right then and there, after a beat, Chuuya's lips part as he realizes that Dazai – Dazai 'I really want to see Kurasawa' Osamu, the same Mackerel who seemed on the verge of jumping him only half an hour earlier – is asleep.

Truly, soundly asleep.

He must be exhausted, Chuuya considers, relaxing back against the seat and wrapping an arm around Dazai's shoulder.
He feels the other snore softly, cheek pressed against Chuuya's shoulder.

He flinches in his sleep, too, kicking Chuuya's shin.
It's cute in a dorky, *oh-shit-he-really-needed-sleep* way that folds Chuuya's stomach and warms his entire body.

He smiles against Dazai's hair, inhaling his scent. After all that happened, the closeness rocks him into a tender sense of familiarity, of fate, of eternity.
His nose brushes Dazai's hair, sinking in it as he leaves a light kiss on the dark strands.

Tomorrow he'll be boarding a flight for Paris, but today— *today* he gets to dig his fingers in Dazai's cotton sweater and smell him and watch him sleep, and that's truly the only thing that matters.
For now, this is the only thing he wants.

"That's soooo lame," Dazai whines, throwing his head back. "I wanted to do bad things to Chuuya in a public cinema, but I ended up sleeping the entire time."

After the movie, they stopped by a park.
Dazai is quietly rocking himself on a swing, his limbs too long and willowy for the kids' game. Chuuya smirks, hands in his leather jacket as he steps closer to Dazai.

“That’s what you get for running on Monster and all-nighters,” he says.

“Hey. This is student shaming.”

“Absolutely.”

With a scoff, Dazai shrugs and pushes himself onto the swing with a weak roll of his heels. “And, for the record, I don’t drink Monster.”

“No, right. You drink a weird mix of coffee and beer.”

“Did you take a course to be so *mean?”* Dazai moans. Then his eyes narrow, and Chuuya can see Dazai’s attention slipping away — something else clicking behind the boy’s restless expression. He never sticks to a thought for too long, waltzing from idea to idea in a frenzied dance. “Hey. By the way, this place reminds me… do you remember when Tachihara fell off the swing?” He smirks, his expression distant as if the scene is replaying in his mind. “We were in a park like this one, right? Gosh. I can almost see it in front of me even now. Tachihara just fell face-first. He went around with a bandaid on his nose for weeks.”

In silence, Chuuya nods.
The memories come back to him, fresh and in full color.
He remembers that day in the park, too; namely, he remembers Fyodor pushing Tachihara over something petty, but won’t say it. He won’t say anything that involves Fyodor unless he absolutely *has* to.

“Yeah. I remember.”

“Do you ever miss those days?“

“Nah. I made a rule of not missing my pre-legal drinking days. My life *truly* began when I met my soulmates, *red* and *wine,”* Chuuya says, although he grins into the words.

Dazai’s lips twitch up, too, and Chuuya can’t decide if it’s a nostalgic somber smile, or if he’s just imagining things and Dazai simply found the joke funny.
After all, he’s not sure it matters. All he can think of is that Dazai is unfairly handsome when he smiles. He’s not sporting the usual, sharp, unreachable beauty, but a tender one. He’s *pretty*. He’s also pretty when he scowls.
He’s pretty with the sun and, God, when it rains and the sky becomes dark and clouds roll in, the amber of his irises almost turns to a rusty

red, and he is nothing short of breathtaking.

Chuuya loves that smile just as he loves Dazai's skin and voice and hands, and how they turn red with the cold. He loves the messy, unkempt hair, so fluffy and curly every time he crawls out of a bath. The bandages, covering the skin — somewhere under the gauze, he's sure he'll love Dazai's skin too.

"That's too bad. I always cherished those days," Dazai says, voice flat, unaware of the thoughts of unabashed adoration plaguing Chuuya's mind. "I had you."

"You've always had me."

"We weren't even friends."

"Life just got in the way."

"You're a terrible liar, Chibi."

"I mean… yeah, maybe I am, but I always liked you. We were always friends. I guess I considered it some kind of standby friendship."

As he lets out a *hmm* from the depth of his belly, absent and rocking himself in place, Dazai doesn't seem to hear Chuuya at all. He dips his head, lips twitching up at something distant — something lost, because they both know that standby friendships aren't a thing. They were just lucky they got another chance.
"A *standby friendship*, hm?" He echoes. "I thought I lost you. I truly did."

"We were kids…"

"And as I grew up, I realized just how much of what we could *potentially* become I had lost."

I never saw Dazai with a girl he liked, Mitsuru's voice reminds him. Chuuya swallows, scanning Dazai's face.

"You grew up with an idea of me, 'Samu," he offers, glancing at the park. Childhood has clouded the reality of the people they really are — the adults they *became* — for such a long time, that even living together has been painful. "I did the same. Idealization is kinda shitty."

"Maybe. But that's when I thought, 'if I can't have Chuuya, everyone is

fine'. No one could be you, so I always thought, 'everyone works. If I can't have him, I'll settle for just anyone'."

Hearing that, Chuuya halts for a moment; his eyes *shine,* and he has to remind himself how to function.

Dazai loves you, Mitsuru's voice echoes in his mind – and maybe it's true.
Maybe he does.
Still thunderstruck by how handsome the boy in front of him can be when someone remembers to truly look and not just glance past him, Chuuya closes their distance.

His hands curl around the swing's chains, leaning forward as his movement stops the gentle rocking of the swing.
Dazai plants his feet on the ground too, stopping. Glancing down at the other, he cranes his neck as Dazai tilts his chin.

"That's it?" Chuuya hums, almost pensive, allowing his gaze to scan Dazai's face. He addresses him with a half-lidded grin, the swing creaking as he pushes closer. "Anyone was fine?"

"Yes," Dazai breathes out.

"Anyone?"

"Anyone."

"So, if your cheap mackerel ass would settle for just anyone…" His murmur is velvet-thick, lips ghosting just millimeters above Dazai's. He plays with the pause and relishes in how Dazai inhales. As the tips of their noses touch, Chuuya wets his lips and allows his gaze to fall on Dazai's mouth. "…Then what would you say about me?"

Surprise flahses across Dazai's face.

"What?"

"If you'd settle for anyone" — he leans closer — "take me."

All it takes is a second, an unspoken *yes* flickering between them. Dazai's surprise melts into a smile against Chuuya's lips, and he shifts closer and fists a handful of red hair and their lips clash together. 'Gladly,' he murmurs into the kiss, but it's muffled and weak and *dreamy*.

They must be ridiculous, with the fact that Dazai is sitting on the swing somehow exorcising their height difference, but it feels good.

Silently, parting his lips to welcome Dazai's tongue, Chuuya considers that, yes, yes, this is what he wanted. He has Dazai, and a great trip coming up and all his friends and he's happy. This is what living means.
This is as good as life gets.

And he gets lost in the kiss — he drowns in the intensity of being found and being ripped apart and rebuilt anew by a tender kiss. Destroyed with kindness, he thaws under the sweet pressure of Dazai under his mouth.

And he might not be ready to tell Dazai he loves him, but he's been thinking about it all his adult life. He loves the way they kiss, and the way they fit together like puzzle pieces. He loves their hands, intertwined, and their lips finding each other in the silence of the park.

He loves it, loves it, loves *him.*

Still caught in that entanglement of distracted thoughts, it takes Chuuya a moment to realize that Dazai slipped out of his grip. He's trembling. His voice is weak, shaky.

"…I'm sorry," he says.

Suddenly, Chuuya feels like he's been pushed off the stairs.
What's happening? His mind screams, taken aback by the change of pace.
This isn't *supposed* to happen, Dazai shouldn't sound so *broken,* and it sounds like nothing good.

"What's wrong?"

Putting some distance between them, Dazai's fingers look for the swing's chains, clinging to them as if to balance himself. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure I can—" He inhales, slumping his head onto the boy's shoulder. His body crumples up like wet paper, and Chuuya finds himself exhaling. Dazai is so close, he can mirror himself in the clearness of his irises. "Can we take it slower?"

"Is everything ok?"

"It's just a lot," Dazai whispers. "What if I fuck this up?"

“You *won’t*—“

“But you don’t know that,” Dazai interrupts him, with a flicker of fear in his voice. It’s a flame that burns cold, and it burrows into Chuuya’s ribcage and makes him flinch. “I don’t want Chuuya to hate me for being terrible at relationships.”

It terrifies Dazai, to not be good at something or not have full control. Change unsettles him.
Chuuya wonders who instilled in the man such a horror for raw emotions, such a fear of being helpless against himself.

Was it Mori? Was it life in general?
Mitsuru’s words echo in his mind again, reminding him how Dazai escaped meaningful relationships all his life. After all, it was safer to chase a ghost than to commit to someone — and he can bet Dazai never expected that unreachable ghost to become *real.*

“You’re such a silly fish,” he says, but it’s fond. “You have no reason to be sorry. And you’re not terrible at relationships. You’re doing fine so far.”

“Not true.”

“*Very* true.”

“You don’t know how I am when I feel cornered, Chuuya.”

“Then we’ll just see how things go.”

“You've never had to *truly* put up with me. I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not suited to be somebody’s boyfriend.”

Chuuya’s arms move out of his control, then, just sheer instinct and affection. They envelop Dazai’s shoulders, pulling him closer and against his chest.
“Let me be the judge of that,” he murmurs, holding Dazai.
He caresses his hair and kisses his head, and feels the other slowly relax under his touches.
He hugs Dazai as close as he can, as close as their bodies will allow.

Dazai’s hands slide up too, reaching for his ribcage. Warm and gentle, they hold Chuuya close in a world-tilting moment — how safe they feel, how familiar.

When Chuuya inhales softly, his lungs fill with the calming scent of

lavender.
Dazai quivers in his arms. His fists close around the redhead's body as he pulls him closer — and Chuuya doesn't complain, he doesn't move, he melts in the contact and tilts his head to better adjust Dazai in the safe circle of his arms.

He can *feel* himself smile.

"You're my best friend, 'Samu," he murmurs against his hair. "If there's anyone worth the risk of fucking up, it's you."

"Chuuya, I…"

Fuck, Chuuya thinks, his entire body vibrating as he waits for Dazai to talk. He turns rigid, waiting, throat getting raspy. This is *it.*
He can taste the love confession in the way Dazai pauses, collecting his courage before the leap of faith.
He can feel the buzzing tension in the air.

And he, too—

"Ah, so you are *here! I've been looking for you."*

As if mauled by the new voice, Dazai peels himself away from Chuuya's embrace.
He feels the brunet shudder ever so slightly as they part, his warmth substituted by a cold sense of loneliness Chuuya can't quite name.

When he turns toward the voice and clocks the boy standing a few steps away from them, Chuuya is suddenly glad he and Dazai are standing a reasonably few centimeters apart.

The newcomer looks frail, graceful.

The way his raven curls cascade on his shoulders, the black uniform of a private school, the doe-like eyes, the freshness of the skin— it all reminds Chuuya of a fairytale, of an ancient prince.
The kind of person you are afraid to break and, at the same time, you can't but admire.

'For her appearance, no one could despise her for her inferior rank, and the emperor need not feel shy about showing his love for her,' comes to mind. Words Chuuya can't collocate, but that resurface as he scans the newcomer.
Even though those verses refer to a girl, they do perfectly fit the boy in front of them.

“Hello, ‘Samu,” the boy says. His dark hair falls over his shoulders in soft waves and curls against his neck. They have the same color of fresh ink, his features bearing the delicacy of beautiful calligraphy. “Long time no see.”

Dazai straightens up. With cheeks pale and shoulders rigid, he might as well be looking at a phantom.

“Hikaru?”

This is as good as it gets.

—

“What?! So you were in the same hospital as Dazai?”

Hikaru nods, petting his iced tea with a pensive, sheepish expression on his face.

As it turns out, he’s just back from a time abroad and heard that Dazai was in Tokyo. Then, he decided to *surprise* him.
(‘That you sure did, you resourceful critter,’ Dazai said, but he was grinning.)

Although his delicacy leaves Chuuya unsure, pouring cold water on his usually boisterous attitude. He feels like he might *ruin* the boy with too much impetus.

But, as they all occupy a table at the Old World, he and Dazai nursing a beer and with Hikaru sitting across from them, Chuuya wills himself to relax.

Hikaru is a friend from Dazai’s past.

He might be from an expensive private university and exceptionally handsome, but that doesn’t mean anything.
Not everybody is a threat to whatever you have with Dazai, he thinks to himself. *Stop looking for reasons this won’t work out.*

“Yes,” Hikaru says, nodding. “Have you heard of the Kokiden Foundation hospital?”

Chuuya shrugs. It surely *sounds* like a shitty place. “Never had the pleasure, I’m afraid.”

“I was fourteen when I got admitted at K,” Dazai offers. His fingers

trace the rim of the glass, but his eyes never leave Hikaru. His gaze turned unfriendly, all of a sudden. Resentful. Not of Hikaru, surely, but of the time he reminds Dazai of. “It was strict, compared to the other places. No visitors, barely any games. Hikaru’s brother was barely allowed in and we shared a room for the longest time, so I helped him out.”

Hikaru tilts his head in Dazai’s direction, lips curling up. “I wouldn’t have come out of there alive if it wasn’t for ‘Samu.”

Unsure, Chuuya gnaws at his bottom lip as his gaze jumps from Dazai to Hikaru. Dazai *did* mention some hospitals.

And Hikaru, in his delicate beauty, looks like a flower who would wither in a lightless hospital.
Yet, there’s one detail in his words that nags at Chuuya.

“Huh…” He hesitates. “Look, sorry if it sounds out of nowhere, but where did you hear that nickname?”

“Huh? Which one? Samu?”

Stop repeating that like you own it.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “It’s kind of a—” *It’s kind of our thing.* “An odd nickname.”

“Well, Osamu said I could,” Hikaru replies, wide-eyed and throwing a puzzled look at Dazai. “Is it not alright? ‘Samu said his best friend used to call him by that name, and thinking about it made him feel better. So, since ‘Samu could make me feel at home, I hoped I could help him in return.” Then, for a long moment, Hikaru looks at Chuuya and his lips part. “*Oh.* So *you* are the famous Slug?!”

“Slug,” Chuuya echoes, eyebrows disappearing behind his hair.

It makes Dazai chuckle.

“Focus on the *famous,* Chibi. I used to talk about you a normal amount.”

Chuuya grins, squeezing Dazai’s hand as the pet name soothes his irritation for being called a slug. “Oh, did you?”

Their eyes meet, and he fears they’ll be forever lost in the moment — gazes and hands locked, just them and their magnetic pull as the

world passes them by.

“Is it fine?” Hikaru asks. The sense of intimacy shatters when he speaks, yanking Chuuya back to reality. Damn, they must be *cringe*. Dazai seems to be in a similar state of surprise, because he blinks and asks: “Huh, what do you mean?”

“Is it fine if I call you that, too?” Hikaru doesn’t look up, fingertips tracing the silhouette of his glass. “If I continue to call you ‘Samu?”

Hesitant, Dazai glimpses at Chuuya. “It’s fine by me, of course. Chuuya…?”

His amber irises seem to wait for his answer, for his permission, wondering if their nickname can be shared — if that door can be opened to someone else.
But, all Chuuya can think of is how Dazai used ‘Samu to feel at home, to feel somebody *close*.

How can he be jealous of a nickname, if it means Dazai is using their bond to ground himself?

“It’s your name, Dazai. It doesn’t have a copyright or shit,” he says, shouldering him playfully. Then he turns to Hikaru, smirking and lifting his beer in a toast. He can’t *gatekeep* Dazai, nor he wants to. “As long as you don’t call me a fucking *slug* again, we’re cool.”

“Ah! I’m mortified about that. I just used that name, and I didn’t *think* —“

“Oi, kid, I’m teasing.” His grin stretches. “You’re fine.”

With a blush dusting his cheeks, Hikaru bows his head. “Thank you.”

“No, no, thank *you* for helping Dazai out during that time. I’m glad he was with someone he trusted.”

“Chibi, don’t make me cry~”

“But it’s true!”

Dramatically, Dazai swings an arm and lifts a hand to his forehead. “Oh, no! Water from my tear ducts! Whatever shall I do?”

“Idiot,” Chuuya mumbles under his breath, before turning to Hikaru. The softest smile has bloomed on his lips against his will, and he

doesn't know what to do with it or how to hide this sudden tenderness — this gentle reassurance born from knowing that Dazai has good, real friends. Even in an unfriendly place, he was never alone. That's all Chuuya ever wanted for him — for that lonely kid who always seemed to prefer books to people. "Really, Hikaru-kun, it means more than you know. Thank you for looking after this menace here for me while I wasn't around."

Hikaru claps his hands, his manicured fingers coming together with a cheerful sound.
How polite, Chuuya thinks again.

He bears the elegance of beautiful calligraphy, of music, and the warmth of the sun. He looks like a prince from an old Heian novel, and Dazai has the audacity to call him a *critter*.
Unbelievable.

"Same! I feel like I know you already, Chuuya-san." Then he smiles, and his irises turn grey-blue — like a winter ocean, like a statue under the rain. His head dips in another bow. Glossy strands of raven hair fall at the sides of his face, like ink against paper. "Please, be my friend too."

This is nice, Chuuya thinks again.
This is good.
Once he'll be back from Paris, he supposes, he and Dazai might invite Hikaru to their house for dinner. Oda, too, and the Flags.

"Sure thing," he says, smiling. "Dazai's friends are my friends."

He means it, he *truly* does.
Dazai grins at that, eyes clear as if a stone has just rolled off his chest. He pulls Chuuya in for a kiss — a peck on the lips, quick and innocent and mindless, but it unleashes a kaleidoscope of butterflies in Chuuya's chest.

Oh, he thinks, *wow*.

This is the first time Dazai kisses him in public.

—

That evening, the last one Chuuya will spend in Yokohama before a week on the other end of the world, Dazai's heart is heavy.

After a week of barely crossing each other at home, their date went fast despite Dazai's efforts to slow down time.
He misses Chuuya already, and it's weird. It's embarrassing.
He tries to savor each moment when they are together, but it never seems enough.
He got used to having Chuuya under his hands every day embarrassingly fast.

Dazai is— quite frankly, he's sure he is going to *die.*

He'd gladly smash his head against a wall just to stop his pulse from racing every time he thinks about Chuuya, because this *can't* be healthy and he's not sure if this is love or some obscure disease that's going to finally send him six feet under.
It's disgusting. *He's* disgusting.

He hates to know that he'll sleep and wake up without Chuuya for seven nights when they just found each other.

If you'll settle for anyone, just take me.

Feeling heat creep up his neck, Dazai pushes his face into the pillow and muffles a squeal against the fabric. Christ, why does the Chibi have to act all cool like that? He's just a *shrimp,* for heaven's sake.

Damn.

"Dazai?"

Sheepishly, he raises his head. Chuuya is sitting on the bed, a soft smile crossing his face. "H'mm?"

"You ok? What are you squealing about?"

"You."

Considering how Chuuya's blue irises stare at him, he didn't expect an honest answer. "…Are you trying to curse me again?"

"I am *not,"* he moans, kicking his feet. "Do you really have to leave?"

"I do. Trust me if I say I really would rather take you with me— I don't know, an emotional support fish."

"Chuuya is mean even when he tries to be romantic," Dazai hums. It must be a *talent.*

Sighing, the redhead rubs a hand across his face. “And you’re impossible,” he growls, fingers pressing over his eyelids.
Which is not a great idea, considering he’s smearing mascara across his cheeks. Dazai finds himself smirking at the sight, propping himself up and moving closer to Chuuya.

“You look like a panda, *Mr. Creative director,”* he murmurs. The vibration of his voice, half a joke and half a *purr,* makes Chuuya wince. His cheeks turn the slightest shade of peony pink, too.

“Shut up. I’m too tired for a skincare routine.”

“Well, then I guess you’re lucky. I am into you even if you look like a panda,” Dazai says. It’s honest.

Shaking his head, Chuuya waves the comment away as if he didn’t just turn purple — *liar.* The red on his cheeks deepens, swallowing every inch of skin up to his ears. *Adorable,* Dazai finds himself thinking. “Yeah, whatever. Just don’t be a menace while I’m away.”

“What? I should be offended, Slug. I am the very personification of sainthood.”

“Sure. *Sure.* Then it’d be great if his holiness could clean the goddamn house while I’m away. The kitchen shelves too, not like you always do,” he adds. Dazai grins— he never cleans them because seeing Chuuya climb onto chairs like an oversized, foul-mouthed red panda is hilarious, but this time around? He can be good, this time. Just for this once. “And eat proper meals, not only that shitty canned crab. Odasaku can come over anytime, and so can Hikaru. I just—“

Before Chuuya can recount all the things Dazai should do, all the little things that feel useless without Chuuya around, Dazai tugs him into a kiss. The vibrato of Chuuya’s voice as it dies against his mouth is a small but meaningful victory.

“I'll be fine," Dazai whispers. "Just be back soon, ok?”

How uncharacteristically sheepish it sounds, to the point that his own voice takes him aback. Dazai is self-assured and cheeky and proud to be called a menace, but seldom shy.

“I will,” Chuuya promises. “I’m sorry for leaving you alone.”

I have been alone all my life, Dazai thinks. *You and Odasaku are the only ones who ever apologized for it.*

His lips curl up as he presses Chuuya closer to his chest.

“It’s ok. You’ll have fun bossing everyone around in Paris.”

“Oi, look, about Paris—“

“—Here, all alone, I’ll be fine. I’ll set fire to the curtains, and paint on the walls and melt the stove and—“

“Fyodor is gonna be in Paris, too,” Chuuya blurts out.
He vomits out the information together with a long-held exhale as if he expects Dazai to get mad, or jealous, or *worse*.

But he doesn’t. He stares at Chuuya, puzzled, and his mind blanks out. There’s so much anxiety in those words, way more than Dazai thinks his already perpetually-tensed self can absorb. Chuuya’s afraid, and that bleeds into Dazai’s rampaging anxiety against his will. It *transfers*.
An ice-cold hand squeezes his chest, and he’s not sure if this chasm opening in his body is bad or *human*.

But Chuuya will be back soon. They’ll be together then. Their reunion only took over ten years — what’s a few weeks more?

“Oh,” he hears himself saying. “Ok. Throw him in the Seine for me, I guess.”

“I definitely *won’t* do that, considering he’s the artistic director of the whole project. Plus he’s a good friend, and I know you guys don’t like each other but… he’s a person I care about, so I’m putting it out there.”

Dazai squints, trying to gauge the situation. He’s not dumb and he knows there’s more, but he’ll be damned if he asks. “You don’t have to state every person your work with, you know.”

“Yeah, but I thought you’d want to hear it from me *before* you stumble upon an Instagram Story.”

Fair, Dazai thinks. He *does* appreciate it. “You said it today, Chuuya: your friends are my friends.”

“Even Fedya?”

“Even the rat, yes.”

And it might not be *entirely* true, because he has no intention of befriending a man who cares more about his Ushanka than about global warming, but the way Chuuya's shoulders sag is worth the little white lie.
His face relaxes, too, and Dazai can't help but think he likes the redhead better when he's happy. His entire face *smiles.*

"Thank you," Chuuya murmurs. "Thank you, 'Samu, that means a lot. And I'll be home soon anyway, and I'll bring you loads of wine and cheese and souvenirs, and—" He scrunches his nose. "Actually, wait. One sec." As he says that Chuuya jumps to his feet, reaching Dazai's desk and grabbing a pen. Dazai follows his movements as the redhead plummets back onto the bed, rolling up his own sleeves. The pen clicks, and he starts *writing.*

Ink on skin.

For some reason that he can't explain, Dazai finds himself speechless. He was scolded whenever he doodled on his skin. Once, he was slapped. And Chuuya—

"What are you doing?" He wheezes out, staring.

"Writing your name on my arm," Chuuya explains. He's saying it as if it's obvious, without lifting his gaze from the inside of his arm as he keeps scribbling. "So I will take something of you with me. You know, for good luck."

Dazai pouts. *Why* is his chest so tight? "That doesn't make any sense. Does Chuuya plan on not washing for a week? Disgusting."

"You are disgusting," Chuuya retorts, but it lacks bite. Proudly, he shows him the inside of his arm: Dazai's name is tattooed there, blue ink on clean skin. "See? I'll take it with me. I've got your name written in my blood."

Dazai's heart skips a beat. How stupid, he thinks. How corny and childish.
And yet— *yet* somehow Chuuya's shit-eating grin, and that scribbled name and that stupid gel pen that will bleed all over his clean sheets are the most *beautiful* thing he has ever seen.

I'll take you with me.

He's worthy of being remembered, after all. His name won't slip away, out of sight and out of mind and *forgotten* before his absence can be

mourned.
It must be the sweetest gesture anyone has ever done for him.

Something in him *fractures.*
Without warning, he breaks under the pressure of all those years of silence and bottled-up fears, of swallowed words that tasted like iron and ash.

“I didn’t bail on your birthday party, Chuuya,” he murmurs, the words lining up one after the other, slipping out of his control. “I never meant to just disappear from everybody’s lives. That was never the plan. I don’t go around broadcasting it, but I was in a clinic.” He swallows with a dry mouth. “Well. Several, to be precise.”

From the way Chuuya turns pale, all the color drained off his cheeks, he didn’t expect the change of subject. When he faces Dazai, a sea of uneasiness taints the blue of his eyes.

“I had a hunch,” he whispers. “After what Hikaru said, I figured that was the case.”

Dazai hesitates, swallowing through shards of glass. “There are things I didn’t explain. Things you don’t know.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Chuuya murmurs, interrupting him before he forces himself to say something he’s not ready to admit. He grabs Dazai’s hand, too, and his skin is *warm* and tender and Dazai feels like crying. “I saw some scars and stuff on your skin, on the day of the party.”

Dazai gnaws at his bottom lip, hand squeezing Chuuya’s fingers as he refuses to look at him. Half of his face is covered by his bangs, concealing his expressions and granting him a fleeting, false sense or safety.

“Back then, I thought I would get strong enough in time. And I would see you again soon, so very soon. But I never did.”

“No one told me.”

“Yeah,” Dazai puffs out. His mind screams for him to play it safe, begging him to stop now while he can— before it’s too late, before he scares Chuuya away. He’s never felt this naked before. It’s terrifying. He hopes it’ll evolve into the first step toward a future where he can break free — free of his demons, and free of some dark turns of his past. He only wants to remember the past he shares with Chuuya, a

sweet flicker in an existence made of shame.
This past he wants to make his own again.

"I don't understand," Chuuya says. "Why didn't my dads say something? They just said you left for another city."

Dazai shrugs. "Would it have changed anything?"

"Yeah, you *fish.* I would have visited."

…Oh.
He never considered *that* possibility, and yet it seems so obvious now. He couldn't escape, and Chuuya didn't know where to find him.

"I assume Mori didn't tell anyone, or someone might have stopped him from pushing me. And we can't have that, right? God forbid he lost the prodigy in his care." He shudders, the words choking him. "Quote unquote, by the way. I don't call myself a prodigy on a daily basis."

Chuuya snorts.
He sounds damp and weak, and he seems on the verge of blinking away tears. His thumb traces patterns on the back of Dazai's hand. And he never considered himself a *crybaby,* but hearing Chuuya so choked up folds his stomach and his throat seems blocked by cotton.

"Well, you could," Chuuya says. "You *are* a prodigy."

"And believe me when I say it's the worst thing that happened to me."

"When did it start?"

"What? The hospitalizations?" Chuuya gives a subtle nod, and Dazai huffs. "It was soon, I guess— I don't remember much of those days. I only know Mori used to cherry-pick the facilities that would still allow me to go to school and take my exams so I wouldn't fall behind. Which meant, I guess, falling in line with everybody else."

"What the hell?"

Dazai clicks his tongue, waving the outburst away. He hated Mori for it, back then, but now all he feels is just a numb sense of *detachment.* Clearly, it doesn't sit well with the annoyance flashing across Chuuya's face.
"In hindsight, I see why he did it," he offers, trying to pour soothing words over Chuuya's anger. "Mori looked out for me, and got me all

the help I needed, but he also made sure I wouldn't destroy my life."

"I'm fucking speechless."

"Chibi, you must admit—"

"What, that you were sick and he still prioritized your exams?" He rubs a hand over his face, the other one clinging to Dazai's fingers. *"Fuck.* He didn't seem like a bad parent."

"He wasn't," Dazai says. It's weak and protective, enough to make him wonder how much of it is true and how much of it is just a testament to Mori's talent for twisting words and situations. It wasn't gaslighting, he doesn't like that word. It paints Mori as the bad guy. The more Dazai thinks about it, the more shame and disgust roil in him. Because it wasn't only Mori who messed up as a parent.
It was— "It was *me."*

"No, it wasn't," Chuuya claps back. It's *thunderous.* "You were a kid. It can't be a *kid's* fault."

"I was a difficult child to raise, Chuuya."

"And he majorly fucked up, from what I'm hearing."

Dazai ignores him. "I asked a lot of a man who isn't even my biological parent." Chuuya parts his lips, a reply already lodged in, but Dazai talks faster: "The first time I expressed the intention to kill myself, I was eleven."

He says it now, and he says it loud, lest he'll forever live with the secret on his chest.

Eleven.

Chuuya sucks in a deep inhale, heart stopping before it starts running rabbit-fast.
That feels like a life-changing moment; as if the world halted and started spinning in the opposite direction.

He feels like he's seeing *Osamu* now for the very first time, after six months of living under the same roof.
His past is a bruise, one that Dazai guards jealously and sometimes still resurfaces. He wonders if the wound ever truly healed and if it

still bleeds, at times.

The boy he knew already wanted to end his life, and Chuuya never noticed a single sign of uneasiness.
Guilt prickles at the corners of his eyes, although he wills himself not to cry.

“Shit, ‘Samu.”

“But it’s ok.” Dazai flashes him an unsure smile. “I should really take off the bandages to sleep. *If* you are fine with that.”

Chuuya nods gingerly, scared of how Dazai might change his mind. He didn’t expect Dazai to mention it at all. “They seem terribly uncomfortable, huh.”

“Oh, they *are.”*

“Do you want me to leave you alone while you change?”

Dazai seems to think over it, then he shakes his head. “No,” he says, and halts. “I want to show you.” A pause, the corners of his lips tilting up imperceptibly. “I guess I both hate and need these bandages. Bit of a mixed bag, you know?”

“Yeah,” Chuuya lies. No, he doesn’t know. Truth is, with a supportive family and an overprotective sister, he can’t even begin to imagine what Dazai went through. “Look, I can help you. If you want.”

“Really?”

(‘You’re not disgusted?’)

“Yeah.”

('Why should I be?')

“Please,” Dazai whispers. He raises both his arms, the clips keeping the gauze in place in full view, offering them to Chuuya.

His arms are covered, hidden by white fabric, while his name stains Chuuya’s exposed skin.

Encouraged by a tilt of Dazai’s head, mute yet so eloquent, he slowly starts unraveling the bandages inch by inch. He can’t begin to imagine how much the gauze must itch and bite the skin.
No one should be hiding under such an armor — as if living in

prostration, preparing for their burying. No one so young should know the horrors of wishing to die.

Biting his lips, Chuuya works in silence, a grim reverence pervading him and compressing his chest.

He slows down when Dazai flinches. Chuuya looks for his face and for an encouragement to proceed — asking for permission to see the boy he always loved, his ruined skin and white scars and the painful past mapped all over his body.
He takes in the pale scars and the fresh red scratches from where the bandages are clipped together.

“They always leave bruises when I wear them for too long,” Dazai says, almost apologetic. “I’m sorry it’s not pretty.”

“It’s not—“ He swallows. “How *tight* is this shit? Does it hurt?”

Do you think you deserve nothing but pain?

“It doesn’t. I’m used to it.”

Silently, Chuuya swallows.

Dazai is beautiful, and it’s heartbreaking.

Every portion of skin that he unveils is a punch aimed at his guts. He looks at the ragged old scars and the blotted spots where the gauze sinks into the flesh. Red marks and purple galaxies bloomed over the spots where different levels of fabric crossed, kept together by unmerciful clips. Day after day, the gauze is ruining him.

Hesitant, Chuuya runs gentle fingers over the naked skin, and Dazai quivers. Goosebumps bloom across his arms. He’s so *sensitive,* in these spots where no one ever touches him.

And Chuuya wishes he could have done something — anything — to prevent this.
To *foresee* this.

“‘Samu…”

“I’m sorry,” Dazai says, head low.

The apology runs so deep that Chuuya can’t decide where to start dismantling it, so he doesn’t. He opens his arms and nods and smiles

— a small, encouraging one.

“Come here.”

Obediently, Dazai follows the invite.

He crawls into Chuuya’s hold, burying his face into the hug.
“Sleep here,” he murmurs, and Chuuya nods and presses him against his chest in silence.
Of course, he means. *I’m not going anywhere.*

Dazai’s ghost tears remain unshed, although present in the way he shivers.
Tracing circles over Dazai’s back, Chuuya holds him and doesn’t speak. He kisses the crown of his head, rocking him into his arms. Uttering anything right now seems disrespectful. A part of him fears that, in this moment of absolute vulnerability, Dazai might shatter under his caresses, under the pressure of the tiniest sound.

Only when Dazai falls asleep, head on his chest and hands clinging to his shirt, Chuuya allows himself to shiver.

The morning after, he leaves a note for Dazai on the kitchen table.

‘Chuuya,’ the white piece of paper reads.

‘I *know* you're gonna say BuT I aLrEaDy KnOw YoUr NaMe. Ha! I know how you work, smartass. I’ve got you all figured out.
So hear me out: this is for you.
I didn’t have a pen to write on your bandages and I doubt you would like me to write on your skin, so paper it is.
Now you’ve got my name in your system, too. I’m trusting you with a part of me and ya better take good care of it, I'll be back for it in a week.

Wait for me.’

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO much for being so patient and bearing with me while I tried to decide the fate of this fic. I felt overwhelmed and super uninspired, and I reached the sixth draft before I was happy with the chapter and the plot. Nina REALLY empowered me to go for it, and I'm massively grateful.

I promise the updates now will be much more regular! I know what I want and I have most of the fic written down.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter -- and let me know if you like Hikaru, too! Like the other OCs here, he's an author from a very specific era and he'll be important eheh

Chapter 9: Fifteen Years / Dreams

Chapter Summary

Dazai's favorite game is 'hide and seek': he hides from his problems and never seeks help.
He hides and hopes to never be found again.

"I love you, 'Samu. I love you very much."

Chapter Notes

TW:
- Mental health issues
- Mentioned past self-harm
- Scars
- Gaslighting (not between Soukoku)
- Minor character death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It has been a very bad day at school so far for Nakahara Chuuya, age 6, class B.

For starters, Michizou stole his favorite crayon – the red one, which is *obviously* the best color. After Fyodor's grandma took Fedya home early, Kajii blew up the sandbox with a makeshift petard – how he did that remains a mystery. Everything has been a huge mess ever since.

Contrary to what his teachers say, Chuuya doesn't like messes.
He likes watching TV with Beast Guivre, holding onto the Great Dane's sleek brindle fur, and finishing school early and eating crisps and going on trips with his dads and his sis'.

However, something else that he doesn't like *(at all!)* are crying kids.

He doesn't know how to act around them. Unfortunately, on this very bad day, Chuuya finds that there is a kid sniffling in a corner of the school's garden.

To make the issue worse, said intruder is squatting in Chuuya's favorite corner, right under the peach tree.
It's a quiet place, the peach tree hideout. No one ever goes there but

Chuuya.

Well.

No one but Chuuya and the kid crunched down on the concrete, shielded in the dark blue smock and sporting the blue ribbon of the other class. As he lurches closer, Chuuya notices that a mop of brown hair is covering his eyes, and his thin shoulders are shaking violently as he hugs his knees.

He has curly hair.
Chuuya clenches his fists as he inches closer, wishing he could touch those curls — they look fluffy, as soft as a bunny's fur. Instantly, as the connection forms in his mind, he remembers that his class keeps some bunnies in the orchard bordering the middle school's yard.
For a moment, he wonders if bunnies would cheer up the kid — whoever he is, and whatever is his business crying in Chuuya's favorite spot, anyway.

But Chuuya doesn't need to know anything to get closer and try to help. Even if the kid is a stranger.
Even if he's from the other class.

If the kid heard him, he's ignoring him on purpose.

"Hey," Chuuya tries once he's close enough, with a small wave.

No answer.

"Oi." Nothing, again, and Chuuya blows his cheeks and barely keeps himself from smacking the kid in the head. He'd deserve it, anyway. "Did you fall?"

This time, the kid lets out a weak lament.
Something that sounds like a 'go away' whispered under his breath, but it's so feeble that Chuuya feels empowered to just ignore it and get closer.

"Oi. Hi. I'm Chuuya," he insists, tentatively, stepping forward with renewed confidence. For emphasis, he pins his hands on his hips. "You look sad."

The little boy looks up.
He has big brown eyes bordering on gold, like leaves burnt by sunlight. It reminds Chuuya of summer, of holidays. He likes holidays.

“That’s none of your business.”

Leaning forward, Chuuya studies the boy. “Why are you crying?”

“Ehhh? I don’t cry!”

“You do!” Chuuya squeals.

“I don’t cry at all, I’m telling you!”

“But your cheeks look all wet and gross! Liar! Dad says liars are bad.”

"’Am not.”

“Are too,” Chuuya says. But he also crunches down, right next to the little boy. He doesn’t know his name, yet, but he has a feeling it will be important. “What’s your name?”

“…Dazai.”

"Dazai,” he repeats, carefully.

“Not like *that*. You say it in a funny way.” The little boy — Dazai — scrunches his nose, dipping his head in between his clutched knees. Then he adds, in a quieter voice: “I’m really not crying, by the way. It’s not stuff I do, crying like a little kid. I’m not a baby anymore.”

Chuuya scowls. “My daddy says it’s okay to cry.”

With round eyes that look like beads under the sun and tear paths on his cheeks, Dazai seems to think over it for a moment. Suddenly, the summer-like warmth for his irises grows distant and cold.

“I don’t have a daddy,” Dazai replies. "Or a mommy."

“That sucks.”

He has heard that word a lot from Micchan, lately; this sucks and that sucks and whenever something is slightly wrong, it sucks. He is not sure it’s what he was supposed to say, from the way Dazai’s eyebrows knit and his forehead settles into a frown, but it’s true.

Life must suck without a dad and a mom.
He loves his dads very much. He loves them more than anything in the world.

“Yes,” Dazai admits, his voice still unsure as his cheeks turn pink.

“Mori-san says I’ll understand when I’m older.”

“Who’s Mori-san?”

“My guardian.”

“What’s a guardian?”

Dazai sighs. “I… don’t know.” He says it as if it pains him to admit that there are things he doesn’t know.
Chuuya’s fine with not knowing things, because Papa always tells him to be patient and that learning is a process. His fathers always agree that process is good – and they never agree on many things, Paul papa and Arthur papa, so Chuuya knows he can count on this thing called ‘process’.

It means he has time, and time is the most important thing in the world. It goes by quickly and never comes back, so it’s very important Chuuya lives every day in the best way possible.

But he met Dazai five minutes ago, and already knows tons about him. It feels nice to know a lot about someone.

“Hey. I have an idea.”

“It sounds stupid,” Dazai answers, with a light scoff. He also rolls his eyes but Chuuya ignores it because his idea is brilliant. Dazai is just annoying and wrong.

“Do you want to be my best friend?”

Dazai gawks. “Me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because Michizou is super dumb, and says superheroes aren’t real.” Chuuya scoots closer to Dazai. Lifting a finger, he talks faster before the other can interrupt him: “And I like you. I think.”

From the way Dazai screws up his face, his pointed nose all wrinkled up and cheeks redder than apples, Chuuya is *convinced* he’s going to say no. Maybe he’ll say something mean about superheroes, too.
He looks difficult to play with, Dazai, but not genuinely mean.
He looks like a scared cat, scratching people in self-defense. And Chuuya loves Michizou, he does, but he can be annoying and he’s

always dragging Kajii along.
Kajii always makes a lot of noise, and all the teachers think they are troublemakers.

So…

“So I’m looking for a new best friend, and I don’t care if you are from another class, because you look too sad all on your own. So?” He stretches forward, bumping his shoulder against Dazai’s. “Yes?”

“Yes. I guess it’s fine.”

“Good,” Chuuya says, with a nod. “We are best friends forever, now.”

That same afternoon, he’s asking Arthur Papa about guardians.

Are they like guardian angels? Are they good?

The week after, Mori-Guardian shows up at their house to pick up Dazai after he stopped by to play after school. He has long hair — not long as Chuuya’s dads, though — and is dressed like a doctor, with three blue pens pinned to the front pocket of his white lab coat.
He looks scary.
But he allowed Dazai to stay to play after school, and Chuuya can tell Mori-Guardian and Paul Papa will become friends, so he guesses guardians are okay after all.

“You can have ‘Samu for now, Guardian-san,” Chuuya declares when it’s time for Mori-Guardian to take Dazai home. All the while, he clings to his best friend’s hand. “But give him back tomorrow, alright? I want to play with him. He’s my very best friend in the world.”

Chuuya is not sure why Mori explodes in a burst of laughter and squats down to ruffle his hair. He was very, very serious.

Later that year, Dazai tells him that his mum and daddy live in his dreams. That he never sees them and they can’t come to school, but he visits them when he sleeps. Every night, he tells them everything about Chuuya.

Chuuya holds him tight.

He’s not sure why, he just does.

“I love you, ‘Samu,” he says. “I love you very much.”

Chuuya opens his eyes, the memory fading in the morning light.

He's not six anymore, and the spot beneath the peach tree is long gone. The lavender scent of Dazai's bedroom envelops him, gently welcoming him into another day. The sheet smells like summer. Rolling to the side, his gaze meets a familiar face. Dazai's eyelashes flutter as he chases after a dream, mouth slightly agape. Chuuya's lips curl. In silence, he wonders if the little boy he used to be ever fathomed falling in love with the crying stranger under the peach tree.

Damning works and life, he wriggles out of his best friend's embrace, sitting up just enough to leave a peck on Dazai's head before leaving the bed. His curls are still soft, still unkempt and fluffy, and they smell like light — like vanilla and that scent that still reminds Chuuya of summer.
And, with a plane to catch, the only thing Chuuya knows is that he's not ready to leave him. *This.*

Truth be told, he fears he will never be ready to leave Dazai's side ever again.

"You, Dazai Osamu, have no business being this handsome," he murmurs into the silence of the morning, mouth pressed to Dazai's hair. "I love you so damn much. I hope you know that."

Then he pads out of the bedroom, wishing he could take his best friend with him to the other end of the world.
Because Chuuya promised him they'd be always together, that they'd be *forever,* and he doesn't want to leave ever again.

—

The very first time he saw Chuuya, Dazai thought that the redhead kid ambushing him while he was crying looked funny.

Outside of school, the Chibikko wore red t-shirts speckled with mud and shorts that left in plain sight pale, skinny knees covered in bruises and colorful band-aids. He ran a lot, Chuuya, and fell a lot too.
He screamed loud and laughed louder.

Those days, Chuuya's knees used to bleed all the time, his skin a battlefield of scratches and pale freckles.

He either tripped over the strings of his untied shoes or started fights, and Tachihara and Kajii and Tsujimura always followed suit because people would flock to Chuuya with the same easiness as animals to a

shelter.
They got in trouble every other day, and Tachihara's brother had to show up at school, bow, and apologize.

Back then, teachers asked Chuuya why he couldn't be more like his sister. They wore an exasperated expression as they said it, sighing and shaking their big grey heads.

But Chuuya is nothing like Mitsuru. He's rakish and fierce and violent and impulsive. He falls a lot and always gets back up on his feet.

And Dazai… *well.*
Dazai always liked Chuuya's bloodied knees.

—

Chuuya is squished between Sigma and Nikolai in a taxi when the vibration of his phone startles him.

Nik insisted that Chuuya had to take the seat in the middle to keep him and Sigma from getting too handsy before seven o'clock, and the redhead didn't complain. He sneaked in between the two, and that was that; he's not dying to see two of his friends having a car makeout session before breakfast, thank you very much.

When his phone vibrates, Chuuya has been dozing off with his head on Sigma's shoulder and Nikolai's arm pressed against his own.
He lazily reaches for his pocket, rubbing the back of his hand over his lips the second he realizes he *drooled.*

Next to him, Nik is awake enough to shoot him a grin.

"Aw, is Dazai missing you already?"

"Asshole," Chuuya growls, elbowing him in the ribs. Pressed one against the other like this, he can always pretend it was an accident.

Besides, Dazai is probably still sleeping just like Chuuya left him, all curled up and adorable in a bed the redhead never wanted to leave.
"Don't say it like that."

"You blushed." The *delight* seeping through Nikolai's grin gives him the creeps. "Does your heart race a little when you daydream? Does your throat close when you think of him?"

From his other side, Sigma eyes him. His hair — the most elegant

shades of silver and lilac — is knotted in a bun. “What kind of metaphor is that, Nik? My throat opens when I see you. How else am I supposed to suck you o—"

“Of course, it doesn’t!” Chuuya bellows, loathing the heat cracking his tone. The taxi driver eyes them through the rearview mirror. “My throat is doing just *fine,* Gogol. Fuck you.”

“Are you not going to answer your beloved?”

“Right,” Sigma hums. “Don’t leave Dazai waiting.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “It’s my sister.”

“Are you and Mitsuru on speaking terms?” Sigma asks.

From the other seat, Nikolai leans closer to glance at Chuuya’s phone. He doesn’t even try to conceal his curiosity. “Oh? Why wouldn’t they be?”

“She fake-dated Chuuya’s boyfriend, my darling. I told you, can you please keep up?”

“Ah! The affair!”

“It wasn’t technically an affair…” His phone is ringing. He should answer, but the chattering distracts him — and the taxi driver looks at them again and cackles, and Chuuya feels like smiling *too.*

“ So Chuuya stole his sister’s boyfriend?”

“No, no! It was all a scheme.”

“Wait, what—?”

“It’s a long story. What matters is that Dazai is Chuuya’s boyfriend.”

The sound of Sigma and Nik referring to Dazai as his boyfriend ripples through Chuuya's heart like a hundred tiny earthquakes.
He pretends it doesn't affect him at all, and that his leg bouncing is surely caused by a bump in the road, but... God, Dazai *is* his boyfriend.
It seems too good to be true.
What if he'll have to pay with happiness for the rest of his life?
Regular humans are not allowed to be this happy.

He sighs and forces himself to avoid correcting his friends.

Dazai is not his boyfriend *officially*.

But they are something, and they are happy, and that's more than Chuuya ever thought possible.

"What about Dos-kun?" Nikolai is humming.

Right, Chuuya thinks.
There's that, since they are close friends with *rather* blurry boundaries.
But the car is still going.
The phone is still ringing.

"Micchan and I are *fine*," Chuuya cuts him off, ignoring the question about Fedya. "Can I please take this call without being idiots?"

Sigma gestures at him with a lukewarm 'go ahead', waving his hand to signal that he won't interfere — even though he was *never* the one Chuuya was worried about.
His parents got convinced he smoked weed at work because Nikolai kept crying at him to put down the joint while he was taking private calls.

Wetting his lips, he lifts the phone to his ear.

"Oi, Micchan, everything ok? You already called tw—"

"Chuuya." Chuuya's blood freezes. Something happened. Something is wrong. Something is not *right,* because Mitsuru has no reason to be sobbing into the speaker. "Chuuya, you need to come here now." Her voice cracks. "Come home."

—

Dazai's favorite game is 'hide and seek': he hides from his problems and never seeks help.

He hides and hopes to never be found again.

Whenever he has a terrible day, he conceals it from everyone and refuses to acknowledge it until it spills into a lonely panic attack on the floor of his bedroom. And today he can feel it coming.

As he reaches Hikaru's table in the overcrowded university cafeteria, the truth stays trapped in Dazai's crystallized smile.

He doesn't say his stomach is a mess, that he barely slept at all and that he had to get off the train at a random stop because he was feeling too compressed to breathe.
He doesn't say that he slowed down on the way to the campus dreading every interaction, overwhelmed and overstimulated by the simple sound of his own heartbeat. By the rush of his blood. He doesn't say that every step felt like a marathon, and his muscles sting and his mind begs him to lurch home.

What he does say is: "Sorry I'm late."

Hikaru gives him an enthusiastic wave and closes his hardback — *Storia della Moda, Vol. II. A history of fashion, Volume II.* It's in Italian, which Dazai barely understands. — while Dazai takes a seat at the table.

"It's ok. How are you?"

"Good," he says. A mechanical lie.

"You have plans for later?"

"Odasaku and I wanted to go grab some lunch, and we'll just study together." Sheepishly, Dazai rubs his nape. He feels alone without Chuuya around. *Damn.* It hasn't even been half a day. "What are you up to?"

"Ah, I had a casting for a modeling gig this morning."

"How did it go?"

"Horribly." Gingerly, Hikaru waves the question away as if it doesn't matter much, as if he'll find a hundred more gigs. "It was for Chuuya's agency, actually. I guess they are looking for someone more professional."

Dazai nods.
He wouldn't mind keeping a closer eye on Hikaru, and maybe he could ask Chuuya to put in a good word for him.
The younger boy always felt like a brother, someone Dazai was responsible for. These days, Hikaru's eyes — a deep shade between grey and green, like a storm-tossed ocean — shine in a way Dazai can't quite recognize.

They are the motivated eyes of a boy who overcame too many difficulties while he was way too young.

“I’m sorry. I am sure it was a close call.”

Hikaru smiles.
“It’s ok.” When he laughs and reaches for Dazai’s arm, his lighthearted tone makes him smile too. “I get you for a whole week without feeling bad for stealing your time, so I guess that being a jobless loser has its perks.” His grin stretches. “This way, I get to spend time with you.”

“I’m glad we get to talk, too.”

Nodding his chin toward the bandages, Hikaru’s eyes graze Dazai’s arms. He squeezes his wrist. “Are you still covering them?”

Them.

Sometimes Hikaru bandaged him up— and Dazai patched him up to avoid the nurses noticing what they were doing to each other. They would not understand, nobody did.
They were never a good influence on the other, he and Hikaru, but they were partners in crime and allies in a cruel world. Blood bonded them.

Slowly, as his gaze trails away from Hikaru’s face, Dazai nods. “I guess so.”

“Are you ashamed?”

“No, I guess I’m not truly ashamed. I just don’t like the idea of people asking questions.”

“Does Chuuya know?”

“Some of it,” he murmurs.

Chuuya didn’t seem disturbed by the patterns on his skin, by the horrors told by the fading traces of the *dreams* – so he used to call them, with Hikaru. Yet, despite Chuuya’s blessing, he’s not any less ashamed of the scars than he was yesterday.

Hikaru’s fingers trace the inside of his arm, butterfly light.

“You don’t need to hide your dreams around me; you know it. You never had to.”

You don’t need to hide from me, Chuuya’s voice echoes in his skull.

Dazai shakes his head, pulling his arms away from Hikaru's reach.

He used to hurt himself and sleep around so much just to feel at home in his own skin; just to feel accepted.
But why as more people tell him that he has no reason to hide, he still wants to fall off the face of the earth? He has no excuse for the air he's wasting.

"I just don't like having these scars under my eyes all the time," he says, pulling his sweater's sleeves over his knuckles. "It's no big deal. And I don't mind it, since the bandages have become some sort of ritual. I'm in the process of accepting my demons." He smiles. "I'm glad you, too, are making peace with yours."

Hikaru smiles back, his eyes gleaming with a gentle light.

"You've always helped."

"I sure hope I did," he murmurs. "In my own way."

There have been times when he feared that he had just handed Hikaru the means of his self-destruction, but seeing him outside the suffocating walls of the Kokiden Foundation reassures him. *Is this what it feels like to help people, Odasaku?*
Maybe they should talk about it later, he considers.
Dazai could tell him everything about how he and Hikaru outgrew their demons; their *dreams.* Odasaku would be proud of him.

"You found your happy ending," Hikaru pushes on. The smile is still there, his eyes bright and his cheeks rosy and his lips curled up just so.

"From what I have seen so far, Hikaru is working toward his future, too."

"I'm trying." He gives Dazai a small shrug. "I'm not sure I deserve happiness, though."

"You do. It's just hard to adjust to the outside world."

"It really is. And I see you and I guess I expected— ah, it's silly, really. I feel relieved when you say that you're happy, but also a little lonely," he whispers. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you are doing good. But it's like I'm behind on something; it's as if I arrived too late and you don't need me anymore. Gosh. Maybe you never needed me."
His eyes narrow, and a chill rushes down Dazai's spine; suddenly the

boy's smile isn't as bright, his whole projection of health glitching. One second later everything is back in place, but how can he unsee? Hikaru's mask just shifted in place in front of him. "'Samu… Back then, you said you liked me."

"I did?"

"You did. I remember."

"I suppose that's possible… I do like you."

He beams — and it's sad and gut-wrenching as if he's about to burst into tears. "Do you? Ah." His beam widens. "That's a relief. I feared that your Slug had stolen you from me, 'Samu. That he'd stolen our dreams."

"Hikaru." Dazai's eyes harden. "That's enough."

No one is helpless, no one is beyond help. Not even you and me.

Hikaru waves it away before Dazai can finish his sentence, and something rearranges in his expression. He lets out a little giggle, his voice soft and delicate as if he just said nothing of importance. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, please don't be cross with me. I have no idea why I said such a weird joke. I don't mean it anymore."

"Do you still…?"

"Ah, it sounds so very silly," Hikaru interrupts him.

"It's alright," Dazai says. He guesses it's a *yes.*

"I'm sorry. Chuuya is lovely, you know? And he looks nothing like I had imagined."

Unsure, Dazai gnaws at his bottom lip. "I know."

Somehow, it sounded backhanded.
Maybe he's spoken too soon, and Hikaru is not doing remotely as well as it seems at a first glance; he's still 'dreaming wide awake', just as they used to do, but he has just gotten smarter at hiding it.
Which, in hindsight, isn't exactly what Dazai is doing, too? Hiding the razor scars, putting up a facade of normality.

Hiding his ache behind a pretense of stability; hiding and hoping no one ever finds him, for that would shatter his hard-earned *peace.* But then Hikaru looks at him with eyes as shiny as wet stones, and pouts

as he reaches for his wrist, and an ice-cold ripple runs through Dazai. He squirms in his chair.

There's a crack in that smile, and he sees it clearly for the first time — a crack in that apparent will to live.

A window that opens on the claustrophobic darkness of their old room at the Kokiden Foundation for Troubled Children.

"I have one thing to ask; a favor, because we are friends. Can you look me in the eye and say that you are happy, 'Samu?" Hikaru addresses Dazai with an unsure smile. His gaze glimmers under the sunshine, full of color and full of light. "Maybe I can borrow some of that hope too, just like I used to. I always relied so much on your happiness, so… now, maybe, I just want to hear it again: that you're happy." He looks up. "Can you say that you are happy?"

Dazai nods. He opens his mouth.

And—

Shit.

And he realizes that he's not sure he can openly say that he's happy, that he's fine. He's not sure he's made enough progress.
He gnaws at his bottom lip and excuses himself, and wonders what being happy even *means*.

Dazai is on the train home — he can't deal with life today — when his hand finds his phone.

Hikaru's question haunted him for the entire morning, looming over him like a storm.

Happiness has always been such a foreign subject that he is not sure how to approach it, and somehow being asked about it head-on sent him reeling.

He hasn't asked himself if he's happy in a long, long time — and maybe he and Hikaru trigger each other, or maybe misery is just a part of himself he has refused to acknowledge until a kindred spirit came along. Hikaru merely reminded him that happiness was not made for him.

To: Hikaru
> I thought about our chat
> You're kinda good at cornering people, aren't you

From: Hikaru
> Being perceptive is a curse. You should know something about it, too.

Damn, he's right.

Passing a hand over his face, Dazai holds onto the handle on the train and stares at the message. Even among the crowd, he feels alone. Lost.

To: Hikaru
> Why did you want to meet, Hikaru? For real.

From: Hikaru
> Nothing. Really. I want—
> I guess I saw you changed from the Dazai Osamu I knew. From the boy who looked out of the window like the bars blocking us didn't exist. You wanted to jump.
> It was so brave, how you wanted to jump.

And Hikaru would have jumped right after him, but now it sounds like the boy *romanticized* those times.
They were all about survival. There was nothing *romantic* about it.

To: Hikaru
> I'm doing much better now.

From: Hikaru
> Are you so very happy with Chuuya? The happiest in the world?

For a long moment, Dazai thinks it over.
The day they met, he and Chuuya changed each other's lives. They made a promise to die together, the day they met. That they would be each other's always.

But he grew up, too, and he realized he never wanted Chuuya to die. He wanted him to live forever. Live without a single care in the world, and be happy – even without him, if that means the boy he loves can be serene. Because he's a storm no one can contain, and storms destroy everything in their wake.

Dazai's hands shiver as he types up a message.

Fuck, he thinks.

He never wanted his demons to reach the person he loves. He never wanted to destroy anybody.

Inhaling, Dazai looks at the screen.

Chuuya *did* swear to marry him, one day.
That's the promise Dazai held on to when he needed to crawl out of his lowest lows and his most terrifying nightmares. Chuuya might be the only being in the entire world that makes him truly, unashamedly happy. He doesn't have a single doubt in his mind about them.

But.

That doesn't take away the fact that he is scared and anxious, and Hikaru knows exactly what to ask to trigger that mechanism. He remembers it well. His demons are too similar to Dazai's.

He is wounded in a way that opens Dazai's old scars, causing them to bleed anew.

The fondest memory he has of their friendship is soaked in darkness.

Why does he have a feeling Hikaru is trying to drag him back to that dark, dark place? Out of desperation, out of loneliness.
It sucks to be lonely. Chuuya told him so, and life hammered that knowledge into his brain. Day in, day out. It *fucking* sucks.

More than everyone else, Dazai knows how fiercely lonely it can be to be left alone with no one there to understand or listen.
And Dazai— he's nothing like Odasaku, but he promises himself he *will* help Hikaru crawl out of that darkness.
Even if he's not quite there yet.

Even if, sometimes, he's tempted to go back to his old ways; he's been doing just fine, lately.

To: Hikaru

> I don't know.
> Maybe you're right, and I'm not happy at all. I'm never going to be happy. It's not for you or me. But I'm getting better, and I don't appreciate the insinuation that my boyfriend has anything to do with it, so please keep Chuuya out of it.

But Hikaru is already typing a reply, and when Dazai reads his messages, he has to remind himself that he's talking to a friend in need, not venturing behind enemy lines.

From: Hikaru

> 💔
> Thank you for answering, ‘Samu. I think I understand a little better, now.
> I missed talking to you 💔

—

The front door clicks open.

Still too busy musing over Hikaru's words to focus on studying, Dazai has been playing Mario Kart on the couch most of the afternoon.

He needs to unwind in the quiet company of Odasaku, who is marking some tests at the kitchen table. With the sudden noise, Oda's hand stops over the numbers, his eyes drifting to the door just as Dazai's head whips up.

Mitsuru drifts in first, without any apparent sense or reason. She looks like a ghost.

Chuuya trails in after her, looking even worse.

Dazai's eyes widen: his Chuuya. *I-should-be-in Paris-by-now-Chuuya,* whom he kissed goodbye the night before and who left the house before Dazai woke up.

He doesn't have his trolley.
It doesn’t make sense, Dazai tells himself.
Ever so organized, Chuuya left his luggage in the corridor and picked it up when he left. He saw it missing from the entrance.
He found the note saying Chuuya was going to be back soon, and that they’d be together forever after that.

But then...

Why?

Flashing them a glance, her nose red and her eyes redder, Mitsuru

doesn't say anything.

"Chuuya-kun?" Oda greets them, confusion laced in his voice. The chair scrapes the wooden floor as he stands up. "Micchan?"

Mitsuru doesn't answer at all, while Chuuya stares past him.
"Hi," he answers for both of them, and Dazai knows him enough to know the redhead didn't truly compute Odasaku's words.

"Chibi," he calls, swinging his legs off the couch and throwing away the controller. "You're back soon."

"Yeah. Sorry for not giving you a heads up, I stopped to pick up Micchan and made a few phone calls," he says, voice mechanic. The emptiness of it shoves Dazai's breath off-balance. It's terrifying.

No emotion passes through his eyes, blue pieces of glass devoid of light — robbed of a *purpose*.

Chuuya doesn't seem to fully realize Odasaku's presence until it's too late, mouth twisting and shoulders sagging and his chest heaving in a little inhale.

It's a subtle sign that he was praying to find the house empty — and, if he listens closely and looks hard, Dazai can hear the wariness in his silence. The hesitation.

In an attempt to unblock the situation, Dazai moves closer to the redhead. "Weren't you heading to the airport?"

Hell, Chuuya should be mid-air by now.

"I'm not going," Chuuya replies, on auto-pilot. His eyes flicker across the room as if in search of something. "Something came up, and I—" He turns to his sister, holding her close, and his voice falters. "— Micchan, you want water? Otherwise, you can go to my room. I'll be there in a second."

She shakes her head, feet still glued to the floor. She looks like her knees might give up at any moment — rocking in place, breathing heavily, head bobbing down strengthless. Chuuya clings to her, and throws an arm protectively around her neck to kiss her head.
He looks like the textbook older brother, calm and collected, despite his younger age. Dazai knows him enough to recognize that he is bottling up.

This is Chuuya's protective instinct kicking in.

"It's alright," Chuuya murmurs into Mitsuru's hair. "Go lay down."

Slowly, Mitsuru nods.
She throws a glance at him, eyes turning redder and glossy as she looks at Odasaku. She smiles and disappears behind Chuuya's door.

"Chuuya," Dazai calls him, his voice stopping the other as he walks to the kitchen and swings open a cupboard.

"Ah," Chuuya murmurs back. He says it as if he didn't realize Dazai was in the same room. His face remains eerily void, eyes open wide and unrealistically still. "Yes. Hello. I'm home."

"Where's your luggage?"

"The luggage," he says, and it's *obvious* he forgot about it. "Sigma kept it. While I went to Micchan."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm making tea for Micchan."

Dazai's eyebrows jump up. "I can see that, Chibi."

"Yes, tea. In the second drawer to the left. *Tea."*

"Chuuya, you're freaking me out." No, no; what is freaking him out for real is that he can't decipher the redhead. What truly scares him is that he has to *ask*. "What happened? Is that Fujiwara? You should be in Paris by now."

Part of Dazai can find the only explanation for Mitsuru's upset behavior in a stunt pulled by Fujiwara and his gang of jackass idiots.
If that's the case, he's ready to obliterate the bastard.
He will kick him until he bleeds, if Fujiwara touched his friend.

And if he did *anything* worse—

If he—

But then Chuuya lifts his gaze, and their eyes meet and the redhead's walls *melt*.
They thaw all of a sudden, his eyes growing wide and then narrowing and filling with tears. His breath skips before exploding in a hissing inhale.

It’s a second of nothing, a glitch, and then an explosion.

“It’s..." Tears roll down his cheek, and Dazai’s blood becomes thick in his veins. He can feel Odasaku breathe, somewhere in the room. He *ignores* it.

All he does is rush forward, closing their distance, securing Chuuya in his arms and against his chest. He doesn’t want to see Chuuya cry. Yet, somehow, the way the boy clings to his shirt hurts all the same.

“It’s my dad,” Chuuya murmurs into the fabric. “Micchan called while I was in the taxi. It’s about dad.” His voice breaks into a sob before he can finish, and Dazai realizes what the redhead is about to say before he hears it. The ghost of that unsaid truth lingers between them. Conscience hunches over Dazai’s shoulders, cold and heavy. “I can’t. I had to go back. He—”

Holding his breath, Dazai cradles the back of Chuuya’s head and presses him closer. He caresses the strands, drawing patterns in the boy’s scalp — always the same, soothing.
And it’s then that Chuuya allows himself to take in a quivering inhale.

One second of utter silence. Then, he exhales.

Two seconds of silence.

Three.

It’s too *much.*

Dazai throws a glance at Odasaku from above the crown of Chuuya’s hair, clocking the concern shadowing his friend’s face. It’s like hugging somebody half-alive; cold, strengthless, *wet.*

Chuuya quivers in his embrace.

“Dad is—"

Dad is.

That’s all Dazai needs to press him closer into his chest, feeling him shiver under his touch like a little bird.

Dad is.
Dad *isn’t.*

That's how Dazai discovers that Arthur Rimbaud died on a morning that had started like any other, although he would only find out the details later.

He'd stare at the phone as a message from Mori informs him in aseptic medical terms of how a healthy man such as Chuuya's father cowered over himself during his morning jog — one hand over his heart and the grip over his phone growing weaker as he fell.

A mundane death. A useless one, too.

After all, unexpected deaths are the ones that destroy the living. There is no higher reason for that loss, no grander scheme.
Rimbaud died without a reason and with the morning sun washing over his face. According to Mori, Verlaine is still deciding on the day of the funeral — calling in his husband's family and friends from France to orchestrate the wake and the burial.

And, just like that, a life ends and two other existences derail.

And so Chuuya stays home for the wrong reason.

—

"Arthur Rimbaud, 53.

My beloved husband was not meant to leave us so young.

You will be remembered, mon ami.
By your children, by your loved ones, and all the people you made happy.

With sweetness, with sweetness, with sweetness."

"They are beautiful words," Dazai murmurs, throwing a glance at Chuuya as he reads over the obituary Paul drafted for his husband.

Rolling on the bed, Chuuya's mute answer is to hide in his chest, snuggling his face into Dazai's shirt. His nose sinks right into the ribcage, its tip cold even through the fabric, and his hair is thick and tangled in Dazai's fingers.

"With sweetness… It's what my dads always say — it's like their thing," Chuuya explains eventually, voice frayed by dried-out tears. Even if his cheeks are dry, his voice sounds wet. "With sweetness. With love. With patience. To make up for the times they had not been

kind to each other." When he pushes back and looks up, eyes filled with longing, Dazai's first instinct is to shove him back into his hug. "Will he visit me too, 'Samu? In my dreams, at night. Like your parents do."

Dazai's heart stutters.

He hasn't seen his parents in his dreams in a long damn time.

His memory has been quiet, as if even ghosts have forgotten about him; but he can bet that Arthur Rimbaud will never forget about his child.
No matter where he is, he'll never abandon Chuuya or Mitsuru.
The doctors say that it's the meds fault if *he* stopped dreaming for a while, anyway. Perhaps his parents are crossed with him. He never made them proud.

"Of course, Chibi."

"Do you think he's meeting your mum and dad, now?"

It takes every inch of self-restraint in his body to nod. "I'm sure, yes. And they'll gossip about us, too, and about how you need me to reach the shelves."

As Dazai is still trying to think about something he could say to make the other laugh, Chuuya slips forward and presses his lips to Dazai's mouth. It's not passionate, or romantic. It's a request, truly, for companionship and reassurance.
It's a '*make me forget what is happening*' kind of plea.
Circling the redhead, Dazai is happy to comply and give Chuuya everything he wants — everything he *needs.*

He holds him so tight he's not sure where he ends and Chuuya begins.

He works his mouth against Chuuya's, sinking tender hands in the boy's loose locks — the color of the sunset over the ocean, of brass. He tastes like salt, like tears, and yet there's something sweet that forces Dazai to close his eyes shut and get lost in the kiss.

"I'm here," he promises, mouth against Chuuya's. "I know it's scary, but I'm here."

"I love my dads more than anything else in the world," he says, in a murmur, sinking into Dazai's arms. He feels so tiny, so easily breakable as his heart hammers against Dazai's chest.

“I know you do.”

An unguarded 'I know you *did*' pushes against his lips, but Dazai traps it in between his teeth and swallows it back before it can cause any damage.

“It’s not fair. I was going to see him at home, ‘Samu. I was going home. Right after Paris, I was-- Why? Why did this— why didn’t he wait for me and Micchan to go home? Why couldn’t he *wait?* ”

Swallowing, Dazai places a kiss on the top of Chuuya’s head.
It truly is unfair, and even more unfair is the fact that there is no answer and no explanation for this sense of loss.

“Sometimes the world is mean to us without reason, sugar,” he whispers. “But your dad loves you too. He’s very, very proud of you.”

“I want to see him.”

“You will. Piano Man is getting us bullet train tickets. We’ll go to see him soon.”

“I can’t believe I won’t, ever again—” With a hiccuped sob, Chuuya swallows dry and it sounds like the hardest thing he’s ever done. “Fuck. I can’t even say it. I can’t say it because it’s not fucking true.”

“You don’t have to say it, sweetheart. It’s fine. It’s fine, we will face this together, alright? One step at a time. Have you called your dad?” Slowly, Chuuya nods. He also gives a tiny hm-m of approval as Dazai drives a strand of red hair away from his puffy eyes. They are so red-rimmed, the blue of his irises looks like ice. “Good. That is good. Then, now, all you have to do is rest, and I’ve ordered from your favorite restaurant. The Flags are on their way, too. Is that alright?” Another subdued hmm. “You are going to be okay.”

“‘Samu?”

“Yes, Chibi?”

“I love you.”

Ah. Fuck. That’s not what he expected— and this urge to push Chuuya away out of panic is not the right reaction to have when somebody confesses, right? *Right?*

“Chuuya—” he murmurs, meaning to make him reconsider, but the

redhead snuggles closer before he can speak.

“I love you so very much.”

Dazai’s breath hiccups, the memory swinging at him with the strength of a tornado.

When they were children, every time he missed his parents, Chuuya would tell him he loved him. He’s not sure how true or genuine that statement is, given the traumatic circumstances and the stress Chuuya is going through.
The missed flight, the job, the loss he can’t digest just yet are all terrible experiences looming over Chuuya — and they can *twist* emotions.

It’s too much, and clinging to someone might be just a coping mechanism.

He doesn’t know.
He *can’t* know.
But, at least, Dazai knows what he feels.

He knows what he’s always wanted.

“I love Chuuya too,” he says and holds Chuuya as close as he can as his hands skim over the boy’s back. He engulfs Chuuya in his embrace as if it could hide them both and, once again, he vouches they’ll be forever. “A lot.”

He’s still repeating it, mouthing it against the other’s hair, when Chuuya finally falls asleep in his arms.

That leaves some time for Dazai to stare at the wall, allowing the change to sink in.

Chuuya’s father died.

It’s a change as big and traumatic as they come, and Dazai has no idea how to handle it.

He was too young to remember when his own parents died, always assimilating that truth as an unchangeable part of his existence.
He never missed them because he didn’t meet them.
But the sole idea of organizing the next steps — funeral, the Flags and the accommodation in the small country town where Chuuya’s family still lives — feels like planning a war: excruciating and life-changing.

If he only could, he'd spare Chuuya this burden.

He'd relieve the pain if he only knew how.

At least, he supposes, Odasaku stayed with them to take care of Mitsuru so he can focus on Chuuya. That's good. That's *helpful.*

The sun is disappearing behind the cityscape when, obnoxious and unexpected, the ring of the doorbell causes Dazai to flinch.

Unbothered by the sound, Chuuya stirs and groans softly, nuzzling his face in Dazai's chest as if searching for his warmth.

Part of Dazai wants to believe Chuuya is having a chat with his dad, now.
Affectionately, he rubs the other's arm one more time and plants a kiss on his head before standing up and moving to the kitchen.

Odasaku is already there, holding two empty mugs of tea that get carefully placed in the sink.

"The doorbell," he says. Dazai nods.

"It must be The Flags."

Casting him a quick glance, Odasaku squints. His blue eyes narrow. "Who?"

"Chuuya's friends."

"Ah. Right. Do they know…?"

"Yeah." He told them. "They should be on their way."

After all, it's not like Chuuya is going to move anytime soon, buried under the covers and barely breathing at all and hidden from the world. Casting one last glance behind his shoulder, studying the closed doors that hide the Nakahara sibling, Dazai crosses the apartment to get the door. Whoever is behind it didn't ring more than once, patiently waiting as if they are aware of the sense of tragedy permeating the house. Somehow, Dazai convinces himself it's Ice Man.

"It was about tim—"

"Hi, Dazai."

The voice makes him freeze mid-gesture, his fingers twitching around

the door's handle. The cadence that reaches him is familiar, yet it's not.

A pair of amethyst eyes level him, cold and sharp and circled with mauve as if the man has not slept in years. Just like the *years* that passed since the last time he saw Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Dazai's eyebrows settle into a frown as if that is his natural state of being around the man — a familiar sense of *vexation* kicking in out of sheer habit.

"Dostoyevsky."

"I flew in as soon as I heard," he says. His white trench coat clashes with the blue of the sky outside, with the black of his turtleneck. He carries a tote bag. "How is he?"

Dazai's jaw stiffens. "Not good. He's resting now." A pause, and he ignores how the admission closed his throat and knotted his guts. "Are you…?"

"Don't worry. I'll stay at Nik's, I am borrowing his guest room for the time being."

"I wasn't inviting you to stay," he clarifies, pressing his back against the door so the other can step in.

"I did realize that without the unnecessary subtitles, thank you."

To his surprise, Dostoyevsky doesn't bullet himself inside the room as if he owns it; no rush or curiosity betrays his quiet steps.
His movements follow a melodic rhythm that takes time. He toes off his shoes and loiters in the entrance, almost insecure in his long limbs and white coat and mysterious bag.

He eyes the house, and Dazai would die to know what he thinks. "I've been handling the shooting from Yokohama. I heard about the funeral," Fyodor explains, as he hoists the tote bag in his hand. It has a purple rat with big ears printed on the white fabric, and Dazai would *really* like to fire a snarky comment, but he doesn't. "Should I put down this thing somewhere and go see him? The kitchen, I guess?"

"What's in the bag?"

"Presents," Fyodor answers.

And the only thing Dazai can do is murmur a weak ‘of course, give me that’ and take the bag, fingers bumping clumsily against Dostoyevsky’s. Begrudgingly, he allows an old enemy in his home like an *ally*.
He takes the bag to leave it in the kitchen, showing the other the route to his own bedroom, where Chuuya is resting.

Although he always supposed he’d meet the man again — he and Chuuya are *friends,* after all — he never thought he would see Fyodor in his house. Not under these circumstances, not ever. Yokohama seems to shrink around Fyodor, as if the city tried to gnaw him and spit him out — and it failed, because Fyodor doesn’t belong to the ocean. He belongs to the river. In his melodious voice, one and many at the same time, Dazai can hear the echoes of Nevsky Avenue.

“I heard you two got together at last,” Fyodor says before he steps into Chuuya’s room. It sounds like an excuse to not stay in silence, an exorcism for the heavy tension in the house. “Thank you for taking your head out of your ass. Tachihara owes me good money now.”

In all frankness, Dazai doesn’t reply because words escape him.
All he *can* think about, as he lingers on the threshold as if it could serve as an advantage point to assess the situation, is that it’s odd to see how Chuuya curls around Dostoyevsky’s hand the moment the man reaches the bed.

Fyodor’s lean fingers look as cold as snow as they cup Chuuya’s cheek, and he bends over the redhead to murmur something Dazai can’t hear.

Grasping the door frame, pads sinking in the smooth wood, his mouth goes dry. Not out of jealousy, but because of the oppression weighing on his chest at the sight — because Chuuya is never vulnerable.

The light in his eyes is never so painfully raw, his entire body shaken by sobs as Fyodor rakes pale fingers through his hair. Odasaku is helping Mitsuru, the girl is sleeping, Chuuya has his Fedya, and he
— *Shit.*
He feels heavy-boned and useless. Helpless. His nerves have always worked as a sponge for anxiety, for pain.
When he suffers, he hurts himself.

So how is he going to help? How *can* he help?

“Dazai,” Fyodor calls him, voice sharp. Somehow it snaps him back to

reality. “Are you listening?”

The man’s eyes are colder and clearer than Dazai remembers them.

“No.” He clears his voice. “I got distracted.”

“You were staring.”
You were reeling, Fyodor means, and Dazai finds himself surprised that the other man noticed his discomfort at all.

“Huh, I guess I should go make some tea for everybody…”

“Come here.” A pause, and Dostoyevsky looks at the redhead in his arms. *Dazai’s* Chuuya, who might not need him anymore. Which is a good thing; it’s better if he stays away, because Dazai’s coping mechanisms are *monsters.* “Chuuya is asking about you.”

Oh.

Obediently, he sits on the edge of the bed. Despite the fear of fucking up, his hand finds Chuuya’s hair too.
It’s hesitant.
It’s *terrified.*

“Hey,” he murmurs when Chuuya flashes him a wet smile. “Hi, baby.”

“Hi,” Chuuya murmurs.

“Fyodor came to say hello and check on you.”

“Yeah.” He turns, cuddling against Fyodor. “Hi, Fedya.”

“Hi, Chuuya. My grandma sends her condolences." A smile flickers across his lips. "But I’ll tell her you’re in good hands with this overgrown mummy.”

It could be a backhanded comment if taken the wrong way, but the gentle playfulness of Fyodor’s gaze as it lands on Dazai softens the words.

God, he thinks. Is he really relying on a rat’s blessing?
He wills himself to ignore the pang of heat in his belly, and the blush that no doubt is crossing his cheeks.
This is no time to blush, he tells himself.

In response to Fyodor, Chuuya flashes them both a teary-eyed smile and pushes a damp cheek against Dazai’s hand. With a weak voice, he

asks Fyodor about his grandmother, Sigma and – *apparently* – a pet rat. Rodil, or something.

He asks him about Paris and if he's in trouble, but Fyodor refuses to answer and shushes him and makes him laugh.

As they chat, Dazai listens.

He sticks close to Chuuya, passively assimilating details about Fyodor's life. And all the while, under his touch, Chuuya's skin remains cold, way colder than it should be compared to the bright flush of his cheeks.
The *hmm* he weakly lets out — sounding like a wounded animal — breaks Dazai's heart because of the uselessness of his presence. When he suffered so, he used to *dream.*

There's nothing like blood when nothing else feels real. Suddenly, the gauze and clips covering his neck strangle him. The scars underneath itch.
No, he swears, shuddering at the thought. This is not good.
He's not going to siphon Chuuya's despair and make it his own, and turn it into an excuse to hurt himself.

"Can we do something, honey?" He murmurs into Chuuya's hair. If only the boy *knew* that Dazai is solely asking to have something to busy his mind with. "Do you need anything?"

"I'm ok," Chuuya repeats, again. And again. And *again.* Even if he's not ok at all, and there is no reason to pretend he is. "Thank you."

"Have you eaten yet?" Fyodor chimes in, eyeing the door "I've got a couple of bags of food from the catering at the DOA offices, for you and your sister. I figured no one would miss a dozen salmon sandwiches."

Before he can stop himself, Dazai scrunches his nose. "I am *sorry,* but who are you? The Fyodor Dostoyevsky I knew wouldn't bring food unless it was poisonous."

"The Fyodor Dostoyevsky you knew was ten, Einstein," Fyodor volleys back.

"What's happening here?" Odasaku interjects, walking into the room with a slight frown. When Dazai props himself up on both elbows, motioning to stand up to reach him, the man shakes his head and gestures for him to stay by Chuuya's side. "Micchan is asleep, finally.

Poor girl was exhausted." He cocks an eyebrow, grazing at the bed. "What's happening here?"

"Dostoyevsky brought food," he answers. There'll be time for the introductions — later. *Later.*

"Oh, that's good."

Betrayed, he gapes. "Odasaku, that's not the right answer! For future reference, everything Dostoyevsky does is creepy."

"Idiot."

"Rat."

"I've gotta back up Fyodor on that, food is great," Chuuya hums, weakly. There's a smirk on his face, even if weak and watered down by tears. "You're just being a menace, 'Samu."

"Samu, huh? That name sure brings back memories." Fyodor smirks. "Well. Sigma and Nik did also send that food, if you think that it somehow re-establishes the balance of the universe. I suppose that villain masterminds don't waste time with such acts of kindness... Right, Dazai?"

Oh, he *hates* the guy. "Huh? Sorry but, unlike your rotten self, *I* am no evil mastermind—"

"Dazai Osamu," Odasaku says, in a mock-stern voice. His eyebrows settle into a frown, but his eyes gleam as he smirks at Chuuya. "I do love you, but you kind of are an evil mastermind."

"Odasaku!"

Fyodor shrugs. "See? Even your friend here agrees."

"Why is the rat talking to me again?" Dazai whines, although the answer rings devoid of any true maliciousness.

They are only joking to make Chuuya laugh, and then the redhead chuckles and the entire world seems to stop and sigh in relief. The world brightens. Dazai's, at least. The giggle is weak but it's unmistakably there, and it might be a *tiny* sign of relaxation but it still feels pivotal to Dazai.

"Thank you," Chuuya whispers. Dazai kisses his cheek and nuzzles against his boyfriend's neck, ignoring the tender light in Odasaku's

eyes as he looks at them. Reassurance lightens up his traits as if he's pleased that Dazai found Chuuya again. As if he'd given up hope to see him truly, *fully* fitting in with someone.
That's fair, he thinks.
After all, Chuuya has always been his hope.

Come night, Fyodor ends up sleeping over instead of heading off to Nikolai's condo.

He phones Sigma to ask him to check on Rodil — *his pet rat,* Mitsuru explains again; crying consumed her voice, making it low and raspy, Dazai notices — but stays over and confiscates Chuuya's work phone while at it.

Odasaku sleeps with Mitsuru in Chuuya's room, while Dazai snuggles in bed with Chuuya — the redhead sandwiched between him and Fyodor. He's not sure he *likes* the idea of a sly intruder sharing his bed and touching his *boyfriend's* hip, but proximity is what Chuuya needs.

At least Fyodor is keeping his hands to himself, Dazai supposes. And, when they are about to fall asleep, it's *him* that Chuuya kisses.

Not Fyodor. Him.

"I really love you," Chuuya murmurs, half-asleep.

Dazai realizes that Fyodor is awake a few inches away, pretending not to hear, but pushes the thought away.
He presses a kiss on Chuuya's forehead, cradling his nape; the boy's eyelashes brush against his cheeks, damp with tears.

"That's a terrible idea," he jokes, voice dipping in a murmur. "I love you too, and I'm right here. You can sleep and rest. I'm here."

—

Morning comes.

Rimbaud's funeral will take place in two days, enough time for Verlaine to arrange everything and accommodate whoever might want to travel from France.

Not that Chuuya expects his grandparents to show up after they disowned his dad, but one never knows. In a whirlwind of calls and group chats to organize transport and accommodation, Piano Man already booked bullet train tickets for all of them.

Chuuya has nothing to worry about, Lippmann reassures him: The Flags' got each other's back. They have *his* back.

Nothing is the same as it was.

His fucking *life* seems different than it was yesterday.

But Chuuya puts on his sharpest eyeliner anyway, slips on a dark t-shirt, wears his combat boots, and swears he'll be strong.

Because Dazai told him, right?

His father will visit him in his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. I hope you liked it! I was EXTREMELY anxious about this plot twist, so let me know if you liked it!
We have more surprises ahead, both good and /not/ so good.

Just, I want to stress in advance that SKK are huge green flags for each other — times will be rough but, like I said once, EiT Soukoku are dumb but healthy kings 🎉

For Fifteen Years is the name of an essay by Dazai (YES I KNOW) and obvi, Fifteen. Because of what happens in the chapter (I'm mean 💀)

Chapter 10: Look Alive, Sunshine

Chapter Summary

"Chuuya is my twin soul."

Chapter Notes

READ THE TW, THANKS :)

> Grief and loss
> References to self-harm. They are heavy in this chapter, and Dazai is spiraling a lot, so PLEASE be mindful.
> Triggering behavior
> Hikaru is his own warning

Just in general, Dazai's mental health is declining and there are in-depth descriptions of that. The self-harm scenes won't be described and just alluded to, but Hikaru's behavior is clearly triggering Dazai and the last thing I want is to trigger anyone else in the meantime.
PLEASE be careful and if the chapter feels too heavy, realistic or triggering, close this tab. Take care of yourself. Your mental health comes first <3

Sometimes, Dazai’s mind gets lost in the murky waters of memories. Without fail, they drag him back to his years at the Kokiden Foundation.

His present self forswears — retreating like a beaten dog, running into a corner with its tails between its legs as his brain strays back to the old white room that he used to share with Hikaru.

In those moments, half reminiscing and half dissociating, Dazai is fourteen again.
His lungs are heavy with the balsamic scent of pine needles and seaweeds.

The schedule remains carved in the back of his brain.
Waking up; taking pills four times a day, queuing with other kids in a perfect line of white-dressed, pale little soldiers; studying; sneaking out.

He’s fourteen and hasn’t seen Chuuya in years — and he's lonely,

there, so very lonely, but there's nothing he can do about it.
He's just a prodigious kid in an asylum. Just a highly productive cog in a twisted system.
The memories are never happy and often blurred by the medications, he can never escape them.

He has tried to escape, *of course.*
He tried his best and always failed.

Even his parents stopped showing up in his dreams, chased away by the medications stuffed down his uncooperative throat and by the disgusting sterility of the Foundation.
The KF is a place where dreams *die*.
It's Dazai's fifth hospitalization ever since he and Mori moved to Fukuoka.

And so he's *back;* back to the place he has a feeling he will spend the rest of his life trying to forget.
Back to the summer of the Golden Week before his fifteenth birthday.

"Chuuya must have started another fight," Dazai says, glancing at the park outside the window.

Back then, every window was always blocked by thick iron bars, as if they had anywhere to go or any strength left to jump.

He remembers Hikaru sitting on his own bed, too, flicking through a book. He's wearing a chemise that looks almost corpse-white — an odd blend of blue and grey and purple — as he looks up, studying Dazai with wide, lucid eyes. He looks like a doll; the same immobility, the same liquid eyes. The other patients pick on Hikaru because he's younger and looks like a prince from another era, but Dazai doesn't mind.
What attracted him is the *frostiness* behind Hikaru's eyes.
That spark of cold madness.

"Huh? How can you be sure?" Hikaru asks, lips puckering.

"Because it's the last day before Golden Week," Dazai explains. "The silly Slug always starts fights around this time of the year. He gets restless. I just *know* that he will start a brawl with Tachihara about where they'll meet tomorrow: if it'll be the pool or the park. One year, the teachers got involved. And Fyodor ends up picking the spot anyway, even if he never shows up. Kajii will just go with the flow. And I..."

Dazai hesitates.

Ideally, he would be wherever Chuuya is.
They are best friends in the whole world. Even though he knows it's true, for some reason he can't bring himself to say it out loud. Not when Chuuya's out there and he's trapped.
The thought trails off as Dazai glances outside, his silence fading away into the perfect quietness of the garden.

And I'm trapped here, in this place that is eerily peaceful and deadly silent all the time.

He wants nothing more than to be free to go back to his best friend. He wants to see Chuuya, the same person who promised to be in his corner forever. He wants to tell him that he's sorry for skipping his birthday party.

He turns to Hikaru.
A bizarre sense of purity washes over him at the sight of his *cellmate.* With his hidden eye that sees nothing but darkness, however, Dazai is stuck on the memory of Chuuya.

"'Samu...?"

"I guess we should celebrate this Golden Week, too," he says, giving Hikaru a small smile. "Since we can't use phones, at least we can throw a party."

"A party?"

"Yes. Something fun."

Tilting his head, Hikaru tugs a strand away from his face. He glances at the pale linoleum that covers their bedroom floor, perfectly clean and exuding the subtlest scent of ammonia. Saltwater and ammonia. The blood spilled by past patients in the same room is invisible. The blood is *hidden.*

Then, Hikaru murmurs: "Parties are not allowed, and 'Samu knows it."

"That's alright. Leave it to me."

"Are you going to get yourself in trouble?"

Hikaru's voice is so thin, even thinner than his frail body, that it coaxes a smirk out of Dazai. He sounds naive when he's everything

but; he wants a party, he just pretends to be worried about Dazai to *sound* like a human being and get some benefits out of it.
Often, he's found himself wondering if Hikaru is capable of worry - or empathy, or love - at all. He never bothered himself with finding an answer.

"They have to catch me first."

“I wish we could have music, then, if that's okay? Something cool, not the boring stuff that the doctors like.”

That Dazai can do something about. “I’ll bribe one of the nurses, I guess.”

“You’re a troublemaker,” Hikaru says, with empty eyes and not a shadow of hesitation in his voice. “It’s handsome.”

“Ah, you don't have to flatter me ~ ”

“You *are* handsome. It’s just a statement.”

At that, Dazai throws his head back and laughs.
He hugs his knees, relishing how easy it is to laugh whenever Hikaru is around. “All I am is a bunch of flesh and bones,” he says. “I meant the troublemaker part.”

“Well, that’s the truth, too. You want to throw a party just to see Eri-chan,” Hikaru explains. His eyes narrow, and they suddenly look like dried fountains; there *should* be something alive, at the bottom of that grey, but it's just stone and shadows. “I noticed it, you know? How she looks at you. And I saw you two in the garden kissing.”

Ah, Eri. Yes.

Dazai might have realized that he's in love with his best friend, but there is no way he’ll get to see Chuuya anytime soon. Therefore, in the meantime, he wanted to try things like kissing for real; he wanted to learn about kissing with his tongue and sneaking his hands under a girl’s shirt, and Eri was extremely eager to show him all about it. He wanted to learn *for* Chuuya.
She offered to teach him.
If Dazai sees Chuuya whenever he closes his eyes while Eri kisses him with a warm tongue and wet lips, no one needs to know.

He flashes Hikaru a hooded smile. “You shouldn’t spy on grown-ups, Hikaru.”

“You’re not a grown-up. You’re fourteen.”

“And you’re even younger, so stop arguing with me.” When Hikaru scowls, Dazai sighs. He hugs his knees tighter, curling on the bed. “So what if I want to try to kiss a girl or two? It’s not like we have anything to do around here.”

“We can dream,” Hikaru says, quickly. Dazai scrunches his nose, though, glancing at his bandaged arms.

Yes, dreaming is interesting.
He *likes* it.
But cleaning up the blood if they do that too often is going to become a problem, and he already risked passing out twice.
Hikaru too became frighteningly pale when they lost control of the blood loss.

Dreaming should make them feel alive but, lately, Dazai has started to fear that it will kill him before he sees Chuuya again.

“I like Eri,” he counters, dismissing the subject. “She has nice hair.”

“Oh? So you like red hair, ‘Samu?”

The question squeezes Dazai’s heart.
His mind travels back to a specific shade of russet. Even if Eri’s hair might be the wrong shade of red, it still somehow reminds him of Chuuya.
Isn’t that why he also allowed Hikaru to call him ‘Samu’? Just to keep a memory around. Just to keep the ghost of Chuuya’s voice close to his heart.

“Slug has red hair,” he admits, speaking softly. He has a feeling that he might disturb the ghosts that live in the walls of the Foundation if he talks too loudly. “But I have to keep myself entertained in the meantime.”

Hikaru’s eyes linger on him. “What about me?”

“Huh?”

“Well, you know. I’m bored too,” Hikaru says, and the proposal woven in his voice sounds almost *acceptable* for a moment.
In theory, that is.

But everything sounds easier in theory: he can just walk out of the

door, in theory, and take a train and go back to Chuuya. He can will himself to forget. He can fall for Eri or Hikaru or that nurse that always tells him he's pretty and that if she weren't married she'd do *this* and *that*. He can tell Mori that he's exhausted.
In theory, he can do all that.
But Dazai has learned that practice is another thing entirely.

"You are not a girl," he says.

"Neither is Slug. You know what I mean."

"And I don't like younger people, either."

"Isn't your slug younger? He's tiny."

"Older by two months *and* shorter," Dazai says. His lips twitch up at the memory, pulling at the invisible strings of his heart.

Mori sent him a local newspaper article titled *teenage boy wins local poetry competition*; it came with a picture of a scrunkly redhead teenager in a green hoodie that looks more like a punk than a poet. The headline of the article might be uninspired, and the writing is wonky, but Chuuya looks happy in that picture. He's *blushing*.
Dazai doesn't own many treasures in the KF, but that image is one of them.

"Maybe one day I'll change your mind," Hikaru volleys back.

Which would be a pity, Dazai supposes, because he likes Hikaru as a friend.

"Maybe," he hums, looking at the other boy. What he means, though, is that's highly unlikely. "Maybe one day I'll give Hikaru a chance, too, if I'm bored and Eri gets tired of me. Or if we make it out of here, and that silly Slug is not around, maybe. Who knows."

However, when he said those words, Dazai never truly believed they would *truly* make it out of the Kokiden Foundation for Troubled Children alive.
Bruised, shaken and alive.
Healed.
In Theory.

—

That morning, as they prepare to leave Yokohama for Rimbaud's

funeral, Dazai receives a delivery.

“A gift from a friend,” the little package says, signed by Hikaru.
Dazai thinks it’s thoughtful. Hikaru knows that he sucks at self-care, and it's *nice* that a friend thought about his mental health and upcoming trip. Until he opens the package, that is.

There’s an expensive silk sleeping mask inside, and a lavender pillow spray and a funny shrimp keychain.
And a *box*.
A small white box of six, tiny razor blades. The shiny plastic blinks at him as the light hits the sharp white lettering, with thick borders as black as a winter night.

Dazai’s chest clenches as he recognizes the name.
All the memories and all the *temptations* resurface with that unwanted gift like the relic of an old shipwreck, a dead leviathan washed ashore after a storm.

He looks at it, inhales, and his skin itches.

Inside, there is a note.

“I am deeply sorry for Chuuya’s loss. I know how stressful such times can be for people like us.
So, if you ever need a dream, you can have mine.

*I know **I** would need some self-care, and I hate the idea of a friend being hurt.”*

Hikaru’s handwriting cuts the paper, elegant and sharp, and Dazai hates it.
He hates himself for craving it, after all this time, with the same intensity that used to take over him when he was much younger. He hates himself for that split second of *eagerness* before he has to physically distance himself from the so-called present.
This is not self-care; this is an *ambush*.
And the worst thing - the most alarming defeat, the personal failure - is to notice that, after he crawled on his knees out of that nightmare, he finds that it still tempts him.

As he grasps the phone and scrolls for Hikaru's number, his hands shake.

To: Hikaru
> What the hell?

> I don't **want** this stuff

He can't. He can't. He can't. He wants to, and he can't, and he silenced that voice long ago. He can't.

Can't. Why. *Why?*
Is Hikaru that lonely?
Is he that far gone that he can't see the light?
Is he just *used* to it?

Staring at the screen, Dazai swallows.
He forces himself to, at least.
Part of him knows that Hikaru is not his responsibility, he *knows* it, but he can't step away.
He wasn't Odasaku's responsibility either.
Where would he be, if everyone had thought of him as someone else's problem, as a person someone else would fix?

From: Hikaru
> I just wanted to help.

To: Hikaru
> Are you for real? This is not helping. It's the contrary of it.

From: Hikaru
> I just thought I would want it.

To: Hikaru
> you're being pushy.

From: Hikaru
> Am I? I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to.
> Of course, you can throw it away if you don't want it. I won't send anything anymore.

Wetting his lips, Dazai grips the phone.
He promises himself that he won't fall back into this bottomless pit – into this trap.
When he walks into the kitchen, merely to put some distance between himself and the blades, the first thing Chuuya asks him is why he's so pale.
If he is okay.

Look at it, Dazai wonders, eluding every question as he pushes into the room. *Chuuya is worrying about you, even now.*
You make people worry.

That's all you can do.

Ah. Right. There is something disgusting in him, isn't there?

His boyfriend just lost his father, and all that Dazai can focus on — not without a tinge of annoyance — is the fact that Fyodor has made Chuuya French toasts for breakfast. He didn't even *know* that the rat could cook.
Like most mornings, Dazai just planned to grab two black coffees from the supermarket downstairs and call it a day.

"The train is at two this afternoon," Chuuya informs him, glancing at Dazai and then at what he presumes must be the tickets in his phone. He's sitting at the table, wet hair shining like brass and curling around his slender neck. "The Flags are going to join us later. Piano Man just forwarded the Shinkansen tickets."

"Nik and Sigma will take the first train after work," Fyodor adds.

"Fabulous," Dazai says, leaning with an elbow against the fridge. His mind is not in it. His entire attention has remained stuck on the razor blades hidden in his bedroom, and he blames the *dumb* comment on that distraction.

Fabulous, sure.
Nothing about that situation is even remotely good.

Chuuya doesn't notice the Freudian slip, but Dazai knows better than to hope that he could hide his inner turmoil from Fyodor.
The man is a *bloodhound.*

On cue, the second Chuuya excuses himself to call Verlaine, Fyodor gets on his case.
Even worse, only as the redhead disappears Dazai realizes that he's so shaken that he hasn't even kissed his boyfriend good morning.

"What's wrong?" Fyodor asks, eyes roaming across Dazai's face — pulling his secrets out of him like teeth.

He hums. "Are you stupid? Nothing's wrong."

"Something is entirely wrong," Fyodor insists. Then his eyes widen. "Oh," he says. As if he can't *believe* it. "Something's hurting you."

Although the comment causes him to flinch, Dazai refuses to budge. They are *so* not going there.

The intrusion is enough for his half-lidded smile to become harsher, sickly sweet yet pointed. “Prove it.”

“It’s pretty obvious.”

“You’re seeing things.”

“Dazai.” Fyodor scans his face, lips twisting. “Do you need to talk? What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Do you need help?”

God, does he?

“Not from you, no.”

With a scoff, Fyodor pinches the bridge of his nose. “Not from me, obviously. I’m not an idiot and, frankly, I couldn’t care less. But Chuuya—“

“I could never burden him now,” Dazai interrupts, half-hearted, although his interjection gets ignored.

“—*Chuuya* is here for you, if you need anything. And you do, because you’re clearly acting weird.”

“You are weirder~” he fights back. The clipped childishness in his voice is entirely aimed at derailing the subject. Fyodor is sinking his fingers in the chasm opened by Hikaru’s triggering actions, and it hurts. It *hurts.* And how can Dazai ask him to stop? None of this is about triggering *intentions,* it’s about kind ideas with devastating consequences. But the damage, even if not intentional, remains.

“Imbecile.” Fyodor rolls his eyes. “I mean it. Look, I get that you guys are new, but every time I met Chuuya through work he was never remotely close to getting over you. Not once. No matter how—” His lips retreat into a thin, closed line as he crosses his arms in front of his chest. “He cares about you, Dazai. Seriously. And you can talk to him if you need; he wants to help.”

Ah, this is odd. Something’s not right about this whole speech, Dazai thinks.
Something about the way Fyodor talks is too intimate, too tender. One tends to notice the change when a cutthroat man turns *gentle* all

of a sudden.

Dazai's eyes narrow, and doubt settles in his chest. Suspicion burns cold, veined with darker shades of jealousy.

"You sure know Chuuya well, hm?"

Fyodor doesn't flinch. He doesn't react at all — which is a reaction in itself. "I know him enough."

"You *like* him."

"And Chuuya likes *you."* It's a declaration. There are some things he's not saying, but it's a nameless past Dazai chooses not to investigate yet. "Don't make me regret leaving him to you."

Dazai wets his lips.
Is this supposed to encourage him, he wonders? Because it's not.
It's pressuring him, pushing him deeper into a prison of responsibility. Dazai has been rocking on a precarious balance all his life, dancing with monsters: his hands are *full* of them. Being needed – emotionally, that is – pushes him off that balance.

Don't fuck this up? That's right. As if it's easy.

It sounds more like Fyodor just jinxed him, as if Dazai has no choice but to fuck up now. The *possibility* of fucking up manifested his future failure.

He looks at Fyodor, and his mind runs to the blades. "Is that a threat?"

"Perhaps it's tough love," Fyodor says. "If you can believe it."

No, Dazai supposes he can't believe it. The man has been his childhood nemesis for too long, and it seems blasphemous to change it now.

"You didn't leave me anything," he tries to joke, but it comes out mean. "Chibi is not a package, though he is package-sized."

"Dazai." Fyodor's eyes shine purple as he cuts him off. *I recognize self-destruction when I see it,* he seems to say. "Don't think you can dismiss it. You're not doing fine."

"And you are being nonsensical," he replies, with a serene smile.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you." Despite everything, it sounds like a

threat — or perhaps that's the only way he can twist the idea of Fyodor worrying about his mental health.
Dazai's smile only widens.

"I have no doubt you will."

And he knows that Fyodor is right and that Chuuya needs all the support he can get, he *does*. He also knows that the redhead would trip over himself to help him. Still, the rat has no right to tell him what he's supposed to do.

For the rest of the day, he tries not to think about Fyodor, the blades, or Hikaru.
He succeeds.
In fact, he's so good at forgetting about the razor blades that he even forgets to throw them away.

They remain in the luggage.

It's okay, Dazai thinks.
He'll throw them away later.

—

'It was a nice day for a burial service.'
That's what people would say of Arthur Rimbaud's funeral. 'It was a nice day'.
The ceremony is a simple but elegant arrangement. Twenty people reunite in a verdant spot close to a cliff, at the farthest corner of the local cemetery: a harsh triangle of grass, wind-swept, and salt-kissed.

"It is a beautiful tombstone," someone commented. "And a lovely spot."

With eyes burning and a runny nose, his lungs filled with the pungent scent of seaweed and chalk and sea, Chuuya can't quite understand how anyone could define a spot *good* for a grave.

What if the scenery is even remotely decent, though? His dad can hardly enjoy it, can't he?
Dead people do not give a flying fuck about beautiful or hideous things.

They are past worrying about right and wrong. Wherever he is, his dad won't mind it.

He won't even complain that his family shunned him for believing in nothing but art and freedom; for loving a man.
He can't complain anymore.

As he stares at the grave Chuuya, barely manages to swallow around the lump in his throat.
The hill of grass and soil that has been dug out and tossed aside to make room for his father seems to dare him.

Look at it.
This is loss' true face.

This is death, and you shall face it with a proud high chin and straight shoulders like a man, or go back crying to your father.

Perhaps that's why Chuuya's eyes stay dry throughout the ceremony: he's too busy staring at the casket. He avoids blinking lest he'll miss the moment his father climbs out of the hole in the ground, laughing. When a tear rolls down his cheek, it's caused by the dryness of his eyes.

For the entire funeral, he clings to Dazai's fingers. He *relies* on them — their presence, their warmth. He's standing in the middle, Dazai's holding his hand on his right and Mitsuru grasping at his fingers on the left.
They look like children at a grim school recital — sharply dressed, livid with fear.

What's not betrayed by their blank faces is still slipping from the stiffness of the spine and neck.

The Flags are standing further apart, together with some of Mitsuru's friends. Tachihara's older brother is crying quietly, and Kajii's parents stand in a respectful stillness.
Fyodor awaits a few steps away, with his grandmother anchored at his arm.

'Elders like me should not bury the young,' the woman said, pushing aside her black veil, *'Arthur was a good man.'*

Chuuya has not seen Fyodor's grandmother since he was a child, yet she trapped him in the tightest hug — a hug that was *definitely* more solid than he'd expect from an old woman. When she hugged Mitsuru, his sister hid her face in the woman's shoulder and melted into a long, gut-punching sob.

They hugged each other and said nothing for the longest time. Since their grandparents didn't bother showing up, Chuuya could hardly blame Mitsuru for it.
In that moment, all he could see was his sister's desperate need for comfort.

And he can't *help* her.
He can't give it to her while drowning in grief. He can't. He's not strong enough.
He—

"Hey," Dazai whispers, hunching over him and briefly sinking his nose in his hair. The intrusive sound, breaking his train of thought, makes him wince. "Breathe, sweetheart. You're shaking."

Chuuya doesn't reply, his words stuck in his throat as he looks at the two men shoving dirt over the hole in the ground.
Burying his father.

And then it hits him: his father is not coming back. This is not *temporary*.
There's no plot twist, no joke.

And Dad must be scared, he thinks, all alone in the dark. Suddenly, the ghost of damp, *cold* dirt is slipping down Chuuya's back too.
It's in his shoes.
It's slithering in the collar of his shirt and down his back. Darkness shrouds him. He's in a coffin. He's alive. He's scratching the wood.

He can't breathe.

He can't see.

He can't swallow.

With a violent shudder, Chuuya gasps aloud as Dazai drapes his black jacket over his head. "Take this," he whispers.

The sound reaches him as if Dazai is speaking through a waterfall. However, with a grateful dip of his head, Chuuya closes the lapels of the big jacket – how broad it is, how comfortable – and hides inside it.
He doesn't want to see or be *seen* anymore.
He presses the fabric against his face and breathes in Dazai's scent, and gets lost in the subtle cologne permeating the fabric.

The safety of the jacket takes Chuuya to another-where; somewhere

safe, somewhere where no one is being buried and abandoned to the worms.
In his boyfriend's jacket, though, he can hide and finally allow a sob to roll out of his mouth.

Only as Dazai's jacket allows his breath to calm down, he realizes he was starting to hyperventilate.

—

Later, Chuuya is still wearing Dazai's jacket – the black fabric wrapped over his shoulders, this time, in what seemed more appropriate for a burial function — while an endless procession of people parades in front of him and his family to extend their last condolences.
He bows to people he's never seen before, strangers who call him *boy* and say that they are *sorry*. All the while, a lacerating sense of abandonment follows him.

Pressing himself against Dazai's side — his presence solid and tall and *known* — Chuuya zips his mouth shut, allowing his father to navigate the situation for the whole family.
Too spent to contribute, he just wants to go home and pretend nothing ever happened. He wants to play video games to numb his mind, or sleep until humanity finds a way to wake up the dead.

He wants to sleep, and meet his father.

He wants to tell him everything about his grave on the cliff; he longs to describe to him this odd place overlooking the sea that everybody called *beautiful.* At least, the grounding weight of Dazai's jacket keeps him lucid and somewhat sane. The firm, slender hand wrapped around his own is the only thing that keeps Chuuya from swinging a punch at Mori the second the doctor approaches the family to offer his condolences.

Verlaine is the first to bow, but the redhead notices how Dazai's limbs stiffen at the sight of his guardian.

"Mori-sensei," his father says, in a strained voice Chuuya can hardly recognize. "Thank you for coming."

Mori drops in a bow, bending from the waist. His hair is longer than Chuuya remembers, parted in the middle of his forehead, but it remains the same raven black.

If he looks closer, only the doctor's stubble seems less well-kept than it used to be.
He guesses shitheads don't get to age, after all.

Yet how *different* this man seems to be, after everything Chuuya learned about the damage that Mori's actions caused to Dazai.

A guardian is a good thing, he remembers. Arthur told him that. Chuuya believed him.
But, despite Dazai's attempts to justify Mori, he can't unlearn.
He can't forgive.

"Paul, I am terribly sorry for your loss. Arthur was a good man," Mori says. "If you need anything at all, *please* feel free to ask. Our families have always been close." Next, his eyes land on Chuuya — irises a deep amethyst-lilac, mouth crumpled. "Can this be…? My, Chuuya-kun. You've grown so much since the last time we've met."

The man's surprised voice causes heat to spike to Chuuya's face.

"Yeah," he grinds out. His lips barely move. "Hi."

"You were in Paris, the last time I saw your fathers."

"Yeah," he replies again.

And that is *all* the effort he's going to put in.
He's been living with Dazai for months, and Mori has the audacity to play nice — he has the audacity to step further and try to pat him on the shoulder, even, but Chuuya back-steps.
It's probably rude. It's also *nothing* compared to what Dazai has put up with.

He looks at the man in front of him, and all he sees is the person who threw Dazai into hospital after hospital, never wondering if all his son needed was a reminder of his worth.

All he sees is man who made Dazai race ghosts.

He pushed and pushed and pushed until Dazai broke down.
An ambitious man who saw a genius before a boy.
A man who made right and wrong decisions.

Mostly the latter.

"Dazai-kun—" Mori's melodious lilt interrupts his thoughts, and

Chuuya realizes with a shiver that the man is stretching an open palm toward Dazai. *His* Dazai. “Shall we leave them? Paul must want to spend time with his children.”

Dazai lets out a *hmm*.
He tries to move, but Chuuya doesn’t let him go. He clings to his hand, although only just so, praying that Dazai will accept to be protected.

“‘Samu is staying with me,” he hears himself saying. It’s not a *request*.

Mori blinks. Chuuya knows his father is staring, too, even though he has no courage left to face him. “I beg your pardon, Chuuya-kun?”

“Osamu is staying with us.” *You won’t ruin him ever again. I’m here now.*

“Dazai-kun…?”

Dazai doesn’t reply. He just stares and says nothing, as silent as the tomb a few steps

“Chuuya’s right,” Mitsuru echoes. Then, her head dips in a vigorous nod. “Right. Osamu is staying with us to help.”

“Yeah,” Chuuya says. “We all need emotional support.”

“Are you sure your father agrees, you two?” Mori asks, his sharp eyes jumping from him and his sister to Verlaine. He’s not considering Dazai at all, Chuuya realizes. On the other hand, it’s not like Dazai is trying to express an opinion either. “I thought Dazai-kun would come home. You need some time with your father, to recollect as a family, and I would like to catch up on his studies.”

Dazai swallows, eyes glued to the rain-soaked grass. He doesn’t look like he *wants* to go home. “I…”

“Ah, it’s entirely fine. We invited him to stay with us,” Mitsuru chimes in, holding Dazai’s hand on the other side. She finds his fingers and squeezes, and Chuuya’s heart sings because they’ll win. “Please, Mori-sensei. Dazai offered to keep us company and, right now, both Chuuya and I need him.” She glances at Paul, eyes pleading. “Please, Dad.”

“Well, if you say so,” Verlaine hums. “I don’t mind.”

He doesn't seem that interested, eyes wandering over his children as if they barely exist at all.
As if the day is just a joke of a cruel God, and he's floating through it.

"I *know* so," Mitsuru insists. She throws an encouraging nod at Chuuya, jutting her chin out. *Do something,* it says. "I need my friend. And I'm sure Chuuya needs his boyfriend, right?"

Once again, the definition makes Chuuya flinch. "Yeah," he agrees.

"We couldn't intrude," Mori eches. "It's a delicate time. Chuuya-kun, you need..."

"I *know* what I need, thank you very much," he snarls.

Raising an eyebrow, Mori finally glances at Dazai. "Well? Nothing to add, Dazai-kun?"

Chuuya waits for his response with his heart caught in a nest of thorns.
For a long moment, he's sure Dazai will leave with Mori — even if he doesn't want to, because he thinks obedience is love. Dazai can't fight his guardian. He never could.

And Chuuya would love to shield him, fight his battles and break a nose or twenty for him, but he *can't* do any of that unless Dazai allows him to.

When Dazai nods, albeit a heartbeat too late, Chuuya's heart leaps. Even if his voice sounds shaky, he can feel the warmth of Dazai's hand in his own grip.

"I go where Chuuya goes," he says. Then, slower: "And Micchan, of course. They are my family."

Chuuya's lips curl up. "Right."

"We stick together," Mitsuru agrees.

"Well. If it's alright for you, Paul…"

Please, Dad, Chuuya mentally begs. *Please. Please.*

And some merciful deity must be listening in, too, because Verlaine's shoulders sag. When he nods, he looks exhausted.

"Our kids live together, Mori-sensei, so I believe they can decide

where they want to be. And if my son needs the person he loves close in this moment of grief, well…" his strong jaw tightens, and then he glances at the tomb in front of the ocean. "I do remember what that feels like."

—

"If life hadn't separated us, we could have been like the heroes in the myths," Dazai says, voice low, nestled in Chuuya's living room couch.

It's been three days since the funeral, and everything seems the same while being entirely different.

Baki is sleeping on the armchair, curled on himself with ginger ears folded over his little head.
Fyodor and The Flags just left.
The way they filled the house with their presence cheered up the mood for a short while, with Albatross keeping Chuuya's head on his lap, but a shadow veiled the man's blue eyes the moment Piano Man closed the door behind his back.

Chuuya still hasn't cried.

It freaks Dazai out, if he has to be honest, after he stopped crying at the funeral as if someone flipped a switch.

'Dad needs me,' he said. That was that.
Now, Dazai is starting to fear Chuuya didn't mean *Verlaine*.

For now, though, he is brushing Chuuya's hair, the light from the big whitewashed windows bathing the room in a soft, golden mist.
He likes the repetitiveness of it.
As he cards the fine-toothed wooden brush through the russet hair, the movements calm his reeling mind as effectively as they calm the redhead's unsteady, sharp breathing pattern.

The topic is entirely *casual.* It stems from the fact that Dazai has been reading a Western novel retelling classic Greek myths to pass the time, but it causes Chuuya to cast him a curious glance.
Have you finally gone mad? He seems to ask.

"Huh? Did you eat something spoiled again?" Chuuya asks, on cue, tilting his head back as Dazai detangles his locks. He has stolen Dazai's sweater, the fluffy blue one with the cartoony t-rex and peaches on it, and he looks like he might get lost in the oversized fabric.

Dazai scoffs. “I was just reading about star-crossed best friends and lovers, and I thought about us. Like—“

“Please do *not* say Achilles and Patroclus.”

Ah, he thinks. The shy spark of enthusiasm he had toward his discovery fades. *Busted.* “…I was going to say Achilles and Patroclus, yes.”

Instantly, Chuuya twists his mouth. “Yeah, fuck you. I’d like to survive past twenty, if Your *I-am-studying-Greek-classics* Highness doesn’t mind.”

“Alexander and his Hephaestion, then,” he says, mulling over it for a moment; there’s something *epic* in comparing their mundane, modern lives to heroes. Something thrilling. Escapism at its finest. “They kinda met in school, too.”

“Didn’t one die and the other got, like, a hundred wives and a younger lover?”

“Yep. But he was forced to get the wives.”

“What about the lover?” Chuuya insists, with a happy skip in his voice. He’s joking about it with no true jealousy in his words, but Dazai’s mind flies to Fyodor; to the things that Chuuya is not telling him, and he’s not asking.

“Are you *really* going to ruin everything I say by being punctilious? I was trying to make a point.” He scoffs. “If we’re really being accurate, then, Alexander’s mother was a bitch.”

“That’s an easy one. Mori can take that cake and fuckin’ run with it,” Chuuya suggests, with a small sigh, leaning further into Dazai’s touch. “Guess that makes you Alexander? The prodigy. The legend. That seems fitting for your character.”

“I’m not a king.”

“Hah?! You’re *totally* king material, and I guess I’m happy being your soldier.”

For a moment, Dazai muses over the definition. He’ll be damned if he lets the internet dictate who he is, but *Chuuya?* He could be Hephaestion alright. The soul to Alexander’s sword.
The soul to his fiery strategic mind. Two parts of the same heart.

“Chuuya would be so much more than just a soldier, though,” he adds. “We are partners in crime. They say those two were twin souls — and Chuuya is my heart. Just like Hephaestion was.”

Chuuya shoots him a smirk from above his shoulder, mirth dancing in his voice. “And I’m pretty sure you *could* take over an entire continent if you put your mind to it.”

“Maybe.” *I doubt it would be a nice place, a world that I rule.* “My point is, they worked together until the end.”

Chuuya cocks his head to the side, following the brush’s pattern and humming under his breath.
Dazai combs his hair gently, detangling the curls in an attempt to bring calmness among chaos; control among fire. “Yeah. *Yeah.* Maybe you are right: we were supposed to be like those guys, but we messed up and didn’t try hard enough.”

“I think we tried as hard as he could.”

“I don’t know, ‘Samu. I still feel terrible for not reaching out to you when I *should* have.”

Dazai clicks his tongue. *Right,* he’d want to say. *Same.* “Well, we’re here now, so we must have done something right.”

At least, he *thinks* they did.

No matter the occasional detour — not that Dazai needed anything more than a distraction, with his heart set on Chuuya like a compass pointing North — or the time spent apart, they were always two souls in different bodies. They were meant to live together.
A perfect friendship. A true partnership.

“You don’t have to be loud,” Chuuya repeats quietly. Dazai’s hand glitches as the old promise sinks into his marrow, taking him aback; he didn’t think Chuuya would remember it verbatim. “You just have to be there. You said that.”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“I tried, for a while, even though I guess it kind of sucked.” From above his shoulder, Chuuya turns just enough to shoot him a weak smile. “Thank you for being in my corner now. I know I’ve been a shitty friend.”

“You weren’t,” Dazai assures, and his voice gets rounded at the edges as he brushes Chuuya’s hair in slow, regular motions. He means it, he’s always *known* it. “Should I go challenge Samu the Bear in the attic? I can fist-fight him in the garden. There’s only space for one of us in this house.”

“You’d lose.”

The amused tone of Chuuya’s comment makes him gasp out loud. “Against a teddy bear?! Has Chuuya no faith in me~”

“Nope, not particularly.”

Another bigger, even more dramatic gasp. “Chuuya!”

“I mean… A bear versus a mackerel? Not sure how *that* would go.”

“Oh. Right,” Dazai agrees, suddenly dropping the surprised act. That is a fair point he failed to consider. “Guess my reign is going to end pretty soon, then.” The ghost of a laugh dances in his voice as he leans forward, nuzzling against Chuuya’s neck. “You are my twin soul, you know?”

He can *feel* Chuuya’s grin. “Fuck’s sake, Dazai. That’s cheesy.”

“But it’s true.”

“Aw. You two are so sappy that I want to barf unicorns,” Mitsuru interrupts as she walks in, causing them both to flinch and dash apart.

As she strides into the room, Chuuya lifts an eyebrow. “Screw you, too,” he says. Mitsuru smiles.

“Ah, my cute little brother; so polite and with perfect manners. You *love* me,” she declares, chipper.

“I assure you, I absolutely fuckin’ don’t.”

“Shrimp.”

“Ha?! I’m as tall as you, old hag.”

Gauging the situation, basking in the familiarity of the siblings bickering without any real bite, Dazai settles the brush on the couch’s armrest.

“How’s your father?” He asks — cautiously, almost *afraid* of stepping

past an invisible personal line where he's not allowed. The Nakaharas have always been close-knit. With his personal history, that is not something he can *understand.*

"Dad is alright," Mitsuru says, in a knee-jerk response. Then, she stops. "Well. I guess as alright as anyone can be. He says he needs time." With that, the girl shakes her head and brushes a strand of hair off her shoulders, taking a good look at them. From the way a frown curls her lips, Dazai supposes that they must look *stupid;* or cute, which is truly just another word for stupid. "I stayed with him and tried to make him talk — or react at all, I guess — until he asked me to leave. He said he couldn't cry in front of his own kids."

"Yes," Dazai hums. "That's understandable."

"Should I…" Chuuya starts, but Mitsuru stops him with a firm shake of her head.

"No, leave it. Let him rest."

"You sure?"

"I think we should give him space." Turning to glance behind her shoulder, Mitsuru eyes the closed door to Verlaine's room. "It's your turn to check on him later, anyway. And I think I'll try to go for a walk in a bit, maybe I'll take Baki — I can walk to The Flags' hotel. I guess I'll see."

Unsure if he should comment, Dazai presses his lips together.
In a swing of productivity, Mitsuru decided to dive head-first into a crazy skincare routine. It helps her not to think, she says. It seems terribly in character, now, that she'd go for a walk; in character and *worrisome.*
For as long as he's known her, he has *never* seen the girl willingly pick physical exercise over a day spent wasting away on the couch.

While Chuuya was chatting non-stop and holding onto Albatross' hand as if he could crush his friend's bones, Mitsuru said hello to her old high school girlfriends with a strong smile and an empty eye. She changed Baki's litter twice and made him fetch a mouse-shaped ball ('Fyodor', Dazai called it. 'Looks more like Dazai to me,' Fyodor replied) a thousand times.

She is trying her best. But she can't *lie,* just like her brother, and Dazai wishes he could do something more to soothe her obvious anguish.

“Seriously, if you need to cry, just do it.” He says, and lands a hand on the top of Chuuya’s head. “Both of you. Can I do something?”

When Mitsuru looks at him, her eyes shine.
With a small sigh, she climbs onto the couch too; she settles right in between them, lowering her head to Dazai’s shoulder and looking for Chuuya’s hand.
Dazai supposes that her stroll with Baki can wait, then.

“It’s fine,” she says. “Thank you, Osamu. You’re doing more than you know.”

—

Dazai Osamu’s entire existence might be easily summarized in one word: tolerance. He’s nothing but flesh and bones. Aching bones. Rotting flesh.
His house might be a controlled place, but the world buzzes with temptation and stimuli that he needs to artificially tune out of his bubble. He fights every day with devils no one else can see. He keeps them at bay.
Sanity is an odd thing; you can’t see it until it’s not there anymore.

The razor blades fall out of his trolley while he’s trying to find a clean shirt that has not been brutally crinkled by the journey.

Dazai looks at the little box.
The box stares back at him.

Pick me up, it seems to say.
Pick me up.
Pick me up.

Ah, shit, he thinks.
Sadly, the immediate refusal is not enough for the box to just disappear because he wished so.

“I thought I had gotten rid of you,” Dazai says — and how dumb he must sound, talking to inanimate objects.

A madman and a lunatic.

Isn’t that why he stares at the box, and *needs* to fight the urge to open it?
Isn’t that why the blades inside are singing for him? Because he can’t

look away.
He wants to. He can't.
The need to stumble back into an old habit bears the same level of rationality as survival instinct: none.
It's entirely *primordial.*
His hands twitch and his mind screams *no* and *don't you dare,* but it's too late. Something clicked. Something's burning, because Dazai's nostrils fill with the scent of ashes and he tastes salt in his mouth.

Something's *back.*
The memory is enough.
Memories are possibilities.

Pick me up
Pick me up
Pick me up

Unable to get any closer, he kicks the box under the bed with a shaking foot.

He can't bring himself to *touch* it.

How odd: he did the right thing, yet guilt is the only emotion ringing in his skull.
Guilt and shame.
Because that's all Dazai is, at the end of the day. Flesh and bones.
Guilt. Shame. Blood.

A madman and a lunatic.

Coward
Coward
Coward.

—

Later that evening, Chuuya's mind is still stuck on the conversation he had with Dazai.
Best friends to lovers, heroes, partners.
Twin souls.
It all sounds thrilling, like a movie or a book, and there is nothing he needs more than a link fastening him to life.
Dazai's presence shackles him to sanity.

After all, Chuuya always knew they were twin parts of the same

whole; they have lost sight of it, at times, but they always *believed*.

The sluicing of the water fills his ears as he tosses his head back, facing the shower and breathing through the water raining on him. He's been spacing out in the shower for so long, now, basking in the safety of the only place where he can cry freely without feeling like a fraud, that he might as well have turned into a fish.
A silly stinky fish, just like Dazai. Maybe they *are* soulmates, after all.

Every drop makes his skin tender, boiling against his tensed shoulders. Yet, this is the only place where Chuuya can allow tears to flow freely, running down his cheeks in cold, fat drops.

Everything is damp, in and out.

His eyes, the air he breathes, his skin under the water jet. *Dad is gone,* he thinks.

It's odd.
It should hurt a little bit less every time the thought strikes him and, instead, it only hurts a little more.

Dad is gone. He's gone. Gone. Gone. Gone.

Chuuya repeats the thought over and over to adjust around it, trying to hew those words under his skin and in the cortex of his brain – until it doesn't hurt anymore, that is. Until he becomes immune to the power of those words.

The sooner it starts sounding like the truth — an already-done, an unchangeable fate — the better.

Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone.

Pain is a band-aid, Nikolai told him.
He better cry all his tears and consume all his voice as soon as he can,.
Rationality will come next.
He'll hurt, and he'll *heal.*

And Chuuya agrees that he better let it all out now, because he hates every minute of relying on Dazai and Mitsuru and Dad and Fedya, but the truth is that he can hardly feel at *all.*

'Let's get a drink, maybe,' he said after the funeral — and he is not even sure *why* the words rolled out of his mouth. He doesn't mean them.

But he's also drowning in a body that doesn't feel his, his mind forcefully building a boned-our normality that threatens to tumble down at every turn.

He loathes that he can't eat or sleep properly.

Vulnerability scares him.

And yet Chuuya stands with his face jutted up against the direct jet, eyes closed, hoping that the boiling water might dissolve *him* too into mist and steam.

Leaning with the back of his head against the ceramic tiles, he spits out a mouthful of warm liquid that wriggled its way between his lips. It tastes like limestone.
He is breathing around the pain that settles in his chest, trying to adjust inside it, when the soft rustle of the shower's door being opened makes him flinch.

The 'dad is gone' turned into an eerie 'is he really gone?' The image of the underground casket resurfaces against hi will — dirt and worms and empty wood and smooth purple velvet.

Dad is fine. Dad is not in there.

Suddenly, the water stops.
He wills himself to smile.
Even through his closed lids, he can see the shadow looming over him.

He's here. And the weight in his chest thaws a little more. *I'm not alone anymore.*

"Sorry," Dazai murmurs. When he lowers to plant a peck on Chuuya's forehead, the redhead exhales but doesn't open his eyes just yet. "I couldn't find a moment to sneak in without your dad noticing."

Eyes closed, tears mixed with the water drops still peppering his face, Chuuya's smile stretches as he pushes closer.

"You're late," he says.

You're here, he means.

Dazai scoffs a chuckle, but also frames Chuuya's cheeks into his cold, slender fingers, bending until he brings their foreheads together.

His father will murder him if he finds out that he is showering with a boy under *his* roof, but the risk only makes meeting his *best friend* in secret so much more worth it.

“Hi,” Dazai whispers.

When Chuuya finally opens his eyes, all he sees is gold.

“Hey.” It’s hazed.

“Chuuya could have told me I was about to step into literal hell. How do you not get second-degree burns with this water?”

“Years of training,” he hums back, shuddering a little when the water turns colder.
Not much, still enough on the warmer side to be enjoyable, but closer to Dazai’s taste.

Whiny mackerel, he thinks, even if the mental comment is laced with fondness.
After all, he can only imagine that wearing bandages most of the time will make the skin more sensitive to temperature changes.

With a content sigh, Chuuya slumps against the other’s chest, allowing himself to relax. His arms circle Dazai's hips, feeling tender skin and hard bones slightly sticking out from Dazai’s lithe frame. He’s so frail that Chuuya fears he might slip through his fingers and disappear.

A quiver shakes him when Dazai’s fingers comb through his tangled strands.

“Did Chuuya miss me?” he sing-songs, speaking into his hair. The sound barely surges above the cascading water.

“You wish. I was doing absolutely fine on my own.”

“Is that so?”

Chuuya hums, mirthful. “Really.”

“Then I guess I can leave you to boil, if you don’t need me around…”

“Don’t you *dare.”*

He grins, though, and Dazai only holds him tighter. Instinctively, Chuuya melts into the embrace.

He doesn't want to think about anyone or anything else.
He refuses to.
Both his hands – big palms, lean fingers – are spread across Chuuya's back, covering it. They slide down a little when Dazai bends to kiss him.

Exhaling, the last inch of Chuuya that is still bulging with nervous energy gives in.
He yields; he breathes fully, at last, and opens his mouth to welcome the kiss.
When his arms close around his boyfriend's neck, and his legs stretch to reach Dazai's mouth without slipping on the wet floor, it's with barely-controlled eagerness.

Standing on his tippy-toes, he allows Dazai's mouth to tether him to a semblance of sanity.

In the darkest hour, it guides him to a semblance of daylight.

With his brain filled with Dazai's presence – his touch, his kiss, his scent – he feels at peace.

They guard each other's secrets: Dazai won't ask Chuuya how he feels about the funeral, and won't pry on the reason why his lips taste like salt and tears. In return, he will swallow all the questions about the canvas of old razor scars that crosses Dazai's unbandaged skin.
They don't talk at all.
All Dazai does is kiss him hard, lifting one hand to cup his cheek, and Chuuya angles his head and kisses him back.

He pushes closer and sways his hips forward to plaster every inch of his body against Dazai's own. Closer.
Closer.
Even *more;* he needs him so much closer.

When Chuuya asked Dazai to sneak into the shower and bring the lube, it was because he needed an out from the horrible things going on in his life.
With his heart rate slowing down and drumming in sync with Dazai's, he is glad the other listened.

Forehead against his own, Dazai places a featherlight peck on his nose.

"Are you still sure?" he murmurs, and Chuuya has no doubt that Dazai

can read his mind. “We can wait until we’re back home.”

If you’re not in the mood, it’s fine. That’s what Chuuya hears, anyway.

The worry in Dazai’s voice is so tender that it coaxes a smile out of him.
It’s not every day that *the* Dazai – womanizer, impulsive, charming Dazai – shows restraint for someone else’s sake despite being given explicit consent. But Chuuya is not looking for chivalry, right now.

“I need it,” Chuuya corrects him, partially to silence his own sense of guilt. “I just need something that will take my mind off things, right now. I need attention if that’s…” His voice trails off, and his cheeks redden. “If it’s not too stupid, y’know? I think I want to be, like, distracted.”

In response, Dazai kisses his forehead again. “Yeah. I get it.”

“So—“ Chuuya looks up, and there’s *something* in his resolute eyes that makes Dazai blush. “—Distract me, ‘Samu.” His voice dips. “*Please.”*

Dazai seems to trip over the request for a moment; his eyes widen, and his blush intensifies, and he’s entirely *adorable.*
When he bends again, it’s to trap Chuuya between his body and the shower’s wall with a tinge of possessiveness.

“Very well, then,” he whispers, speaking against his skin. Every word is heavy, and it almost sounds like a dirty concession. “I’ll take care of you.”

Chuuya quivers.
He’s not used to asking outright, and Dazai knows him deeply enough to read between the lines of his half-mumbled nonsense. “H’mm.”

That’s how Chuuya knows his boyfriend has him; he can make them feel good.
‘Samu is going to take good care of his shattered heart.

When Dazai guides him to sit, Chuuya follows him without a word and all the devoted trust in the world.

He is tongue-tied, unsure if he should make conversation at all.
He’s not sure if he should speak, or if he should show signs of appreciation — because he appreciates his boyfriend’s sight very, very much, and yet can hardly find the means to express it. He just stares

as Dazai strokes himself with a generous dose of lube, he follows the movements and savors the anticipation and counts his blessings.

God, he's beautiful.

Dazai's figure holds a casual strength, a nonplussed grace, that sends shivers down Chuuya's spine.

Nothing in him has ever been easy to define: not his genius mind, certainly not his appearance, and definitely not his heart.
He has a kind heart, Dazai. A shiny one. But it's a heart of glass, easily broken.

When Dazai meets his gaze and smiles — a little sheepish, wet hair and dust-pink cheeks and pecs heaving just so with every breath — Chuuya is sure that the explosion in his chest must equal the wonderment of the first men watching a flame. He's witnessing something beautiful, something rare. Something *grand.*
The instinctual awe takes over him, crushing his chest, deeper than love and infinitely more nurturing than lust.
And maybe he's being sappy and dramatic, comparing Dazai to everything that is holy in the universe, but the sight of his boyfriend is suddenly new and stunning.

"...Chuuya? Earth to *Chuuya?* Are you okay?"

He flinches.

"Sorry," he says, his voice tripping over his quickened heartbeat. He'll be damned if he admits that he was *thirsting* over the sight, though. "I got distracted."

"Are you…?"

"I'm still sure."

"Really?"

"Osamu." His bottom lip juts out, panic swelling in him at the idea of arguing. He can't *argue* now. "Kiss me and shut the fuck up."

Luckily enough, Dazai *yields* under the request. His pout relaxes.
"Right. You've got to relax a bit, though," he says, planting a quick kiss on Chuuya's lips. "I've got you, alright?"

"I know you do."

Then, Dazai kisses him again — tenderly, hungrily, and when they emerge from it Chuuya is panting, curled against the shower's wall, and Dazai has delved in between his thighs.
With his legs spread and Dazai adjusted in between — fingering him open while looking at his face as if he can capture all the shades of abandonment flashing across Chuuya's face — Chuuya tips his head back.
He lets the water fall over his contracted features.

He *knows* they don't have much time and he prepped himself before, but it's surprising how easily he reacts to Dazai's attentions. He's butter, snow melting away in spring.
Every inch of him comes alive under the rubbing of Dazai's hard-on against his own — skin against skin, water and pre-cum and fingers coaxing moans out of his lips.
What was dark in him gets showered in light.
What was lonely is finally found.

The air is warm, but not as boiling as Dazai kissing him.

Dazai nibbles at Chuuya's bottom lip. Slender, pianist fingers play with the chords of his body, pumping his length while Dazai finally slips inside of him. *More*, he thinks again. Greedy. Bratty.
He gasps, and Dazai kisses him gently. 'Shhh,' he says. Chuuya kisses him harder in return.

Every step of it feels searingly natural. He's so strengthless and needy that it takes nothing more than a thrust for Dazai to push inside him fully.
His lips part around a moan, but the other cages the sound into his mouth.

"You okay there, Chibi?" He whispers, leaning their foreheads together.

Mindlessly drifting away with the feeling, Chuuya nods.

"Yes," he says, voice strained with impatience. He wraps his arms around the other's neck, pulling him closer, caged between the wall and Dazai's body. "Don't worry."

"I didn't…"

'I didn't prepare you enough.'

"I can take it," Chuuya assures.

‘You were made for me, and I was made for you.’

It’s not his first time — far from it. He’s been with boys before, he’s been *fucked* before.
Yet, the tentative, first thrusts of Dazai adjusting inside of him and picking up a raising rhythm feel like his first time ever.
After a life of searching for something without a name, this is it. His first meaningful time.

It’s gut-twisting and smile-stealing.

It’s blue and red and pink and blinding and there’s water everywhere and he’s gasping for air and Dazai is all he needs to breathe.

This is *the* time.
The one he’s been waiting for all his life, as if the boys before have been nothing but a prelude. Nothing but preparation.

(Ah, Chuuya thinks, as Dazai bites his neck and his hand fists a handful of dark curls, yes. *That must be it. So this is his first time making love.)*

Obediently, Chuuya arches his spine under the thrusts to accommodate them. The shower floor is cold and sleek under him. His toes curl.
His shoulders press against the cold tiles and the scalding water runs in torrents down on his skin, Dazai’s mouth sucking at his neck.
He leans forward, though only just, and Dazai meets his mouth halfway.
This is what they were born for: to meet each other halfway. Blend into each other’s proximity until their distances disappear.

He can begin where Dazai ends and Dazai can end where Chuuya begins.

The water can’t tell the difference between their interlocked bodies, and neither does Chuuya.

“Look at me,” Dazai murmurs — his voice husky as he touches an index to Chuuya’s chin.
His hands are rough, but his voice is gentle.

Chuuya obeys. “What?”

“Nothing. You’re beautiful.”

It's incredible how the most passing, mundane comments can turn into life-changing moments. Chuuya never felt beautiful before.
But *now?*
There's something in Dazai's voice and lips and springtime-like voice that makes him melt.
The way his body bends and arches to take Dazai in — all of him, everything Dazai wants Chuuya to *have* — is nothing short of lewd.

With every thrust, the sounds resonate inside Chuuya's mind. They fill it. Most importantly, they silence everything else and fill his void.
He sinks his nails in Dazai's back and rocks his hips forth and adjusts to the changes in rhythm.

His breath catches in his throat when Dazai jerks inside him more vigorously.
It hits a sensitive spot that causes Chuuya's lips to part and tears to roll down his cheeks.

There, he thinks, *yes, right there.*

But he has no voice to speak anymore.

As Dazai moves inside him — his hips setting a growing pace, with wandering hands and nibbling teeth and mouth *scorching* — Chuuya muffles his stream of moans into the expanse of his boyfriend's bare skin.

Before he can hold himself back, an '*I love you*' escapes his lips.
It wasn't planned.
It wasn't supposed to sound so utterly devastated. It's like a part of his soul is *bawling* inside that confession.
Chuuya doesn't know if the strangled sound is due to the utter intimacy of the moment or because he can't keep in the overflow of emotions surging in him, but he doesn't waste any mind on it.

Not when Dazai is smiling at him from above.
Not when he says "I love you" back, and Chuuya welcomes it like gospel.
Not when they kiss, and everything in his life gets rolled back to being *fine,* even if just for a split second.

Half an hour later, as they stumble out of the shower and Dazai wraps them both in the same fluffy towel, kissing as they laugh and shush one another to not be discovered, Chuuya feels much better.

Dazai kisses the side of his head, sinking his nose in his hair and inhaling.
In return, he lifts their intertwined hands and leaves a peck on the back of Dazai's hand.

They are one.
Twin souls.
Like the heroes in the myths, like every 'happily ever after' in the fairytales.

And maybe Chuuya is just ignoring the hole in his heart, maybe he's desperately scrambling for a way to patch up the loss in his life by reminding himself what he can still hold, own, and love.
Maybe he just doesn't want to be alone in the depths of this suffering.
But—

"Ne, Chuuya sure is cute when he's all needy," Dazai says, sinking his nose in Chuuya's hair. "That's interesting."

I love you, Chuuya hears, even if the comment might sound sterile to anyone but them.
But, no: it's a recognition. It's an unspoken confession that reminds him he is loved, and he exists, and he is breathing.
Not without a pinch of awe, he realizes that, for the first time in their lives, there are no *but's* left.

"Right. And you're a dick."

"Well, technically, that's what *you* were asking fo— "

"Oh my God, you're a menace," he growls, clocking the glint of mirth and malice in Dazai's irises. Summer-like eyes. "This was totally the last time I let your stinky dick touch me."

Dazai casts him a meaningful glance. "*Sure."*

Right, he pouts. *Not believable.*

"Do you feel a bit better?" Dazai asks, before Chuuya can carry on with the bickering.

There's a fine, dotted line between intrusive and helpful, and Chuuya is surprised to discover how easily Dazai keeps himself on the right side of it. Tact was never a word he associated with his best friend, before.

But Dazai's not cutting his pain short; he's not trying to imply that Chuuya can just forget.
He's familiar with loss, and seems to understand that it remains ultimately a lonely business.

Their voids speak to one another.

And the thing Chuuya is starting to learn about losing someone is that — at times, occasionally — you might need to remember the people you have close.

"Yes," Chuuya says. Smiling is just a little less painful, right now — and it won't last, but it's a way to stay sane in the immediate. "*Yes.*"

Chapter 11: Next of kin

Chapter Summary

He sees his future in Chuuya's eyes.

Chapter Notes

TWs for
- unhealthy coping mechanisms
- mentioned self-harm
- mentioned blades
- light blood

Chuuya's ways to deal with loss is not the greatest or healthiest, so please be careful 💕

As always, major thanks to Kat for keeping up with my nonsense ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nakahara Chuuya is fifteen.

He's a rebel, a promising student, and an 'unrepentant little punk' — in the words of his teachers.

Words he has heard *repeatedly,* for the record.

He plays in a band. Vocalist, of course, because it sounded cooler than any other role. He likes brawls, arcade games, guitar riffs, and boys. He *knows* he likes boys. The consciousness of such a preference always came intrinsically natural to him. Easy. If the world doesn't *want* to make it easy, if people want to make a big deal out of it, that's their problem; Chuuya likes boys, and the concept seems straightforward enough to him.

It was no big revelation, it didn't break him and tore him out. It didn't surprise him. Deep down, he always knew.

He kissed a girl, and it felt wrong.

He kissed a boy, and it felt right.

That was the beginning and the end of it all.

That is also the reason that brought Chuuya to being splayed on a boy's bed right now, pressed into the mattress under Shirase's calloused hands and wandering fingers. He lays there, skin reddened with kisses, trapped between his lanky-limbed boyfriend and a bundle of bedsheet that smells like fresh cotton. Shirase's parents always tell them to leave the door ajar, unbeknownst to the fact that the risk factor only adds excitement to their misdemeanor.

They do leave the door just a tad open, but that never stops them from kissing and fooling around. Shirase thinks it's thrilling. Chuuya supposes Shirase is right.

They should be studying for mid terms and, instead, stole a beer and drank it, giggling with complicit enthusiasm when Chuuya's lips touched the same cold spot from where Shirase had drunk. They played video games and shared kisses on the bed.

Sloppy, hungry kisses. Messy kisses.

Shirase is older than him by a year and something, which makes him past sixteen and therefore more *interesting*.
He skipped a school year while transferring from the UK, and Chuuya thought it was cool to go out with someone like that, who is all leather and rock and roll and '*it's made in London, babe*'.

Shirase dyes his hair silver despite the school rules, flips off teachers and smokes inside the staff room in the school gym. He's a friend of Yuan, the guitarist of the band where Chuuya sings sometimes.
He lived in London — *'the homeland of punk. Ya know, Sex Pistols and all that'*. People normally blush because he says 'sex' — and he wears his uniform's tie loose. He adds pins of indie bands to his green jacket.

On paper, returning Shirase's interest sounded like a no-brainer.

Turns out, Shirase is an asshat.

Actually, maybe that's too hard a statement.
The issue is: Shirase tries too hard. He is too afraid that someone cooler than him will show up and steal his crown — a paper crown, too, for a silly paper kingdom they will all soon leave behind. When Shirase thinks he's looking elsewhere, Chuuya also notices how Shirase looks at him — like he'd rather have him as a friend than a rival. Like he's scared.

Because Chuuya, during Shirase's first week, beat up a bully with a

blackboard eraser.
Not without a tinge of pride, Chuuya bets that Yamada from 3C is still whining about being put back in his place by a short redhead kid who wears eyeliner.
But Chuuya could lead a gang if he wanted to, and instead sings in a cover band.

Chuuya kisses like he's not afraid, like he's not grossed out by physical intimacy.

But there's a secret Chuuya has told no one. A secret he's keeping while he allows Shirase to slide his hands under his black t-shirt.

Because Chuuya is—

"Hey, is everything ok?"

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Chuuya looks up.

"Huh, no," he grinds out, landing his open palm on Shirase's chest to guide him away. A fast heartbeat flickers under his fingers, like a bird trapped in a cage. "Actually, can we, you know, stop here?"

Shirase's eyebrows arch. "Do you want to stop now?"

"Yeah." Chuuya hesitates, trying to recognize what feels wrong as he props himself up on shaky elbows. "I don't like it."

"You don't like…?"

"It all," he amends. "Everything that's going on."

"Something's wrong?"

Just me, Chuuya thinks. *Just this.* "Nah. I just don't feel like it anymore."

Shirase's gaze roams across his face, trying to pinpoint what shifted in the other's attitude. "Maybe we should play Tekken?" Shirase offers, sitting up on the bed. "Want to go for a rematch?"

"I gotta go home," Chuuya says without a second glance, sliding away.

He pops a gum in his mouth as he climbs off the bed, basking in the minty flavor that explodes in his taste buds.
It takes his mind off the fact that he was kissing a boy he doesn't like

that much. He stands up and walks to the door of the bedroom.

It's still ajar.

Chuuya hates this door, and its implications. He hates these chewing gums. He hates himself for ruining the afternoon, too, and for not liking *this* enough when there is absolutely nothing wrong with Shirase at all.

"Did I do something wrong?" Shirase asks, eyebrows landing in a frown, almost on cue. His bleached hair is tousled by Chuuya's fingers. His cheeks look flushed, his eyes shimmer.

He's handsome, and he's been nothing but sweet. He did nothing wrong.

"No, I don't think so," Chuuya says.

"Then what's with you, suddenly?"

"I told you, I've gotta go. My sister will kill me if I'm late."

"Look, Chuuya—"

"I think we should break up," Chuuya hears himself say. He's annoyed at the chewing gum and Shirase and himself. He hides his hands in his pockets and goes for the door. "See ya in class."

Once he finally arrives home, Chuuya makes a beeline for the stairs. The attic door opens with a creak, yet Chuuya can barely hear it under his drumming heartbeat.

Because what Chuuya doesn't say, what Shirase failed to see, is that it's hard to play tough all the time. He doesn't *enjoy* being singled out as the cool singer with the French parents and the pretty sister.

He might kiss like he's not afraid of exploring someone's body, but he's terrified.

Nakahara Chuuya doesn't like his current life. He hates it because his best friend is not in it.
The last time Dazai texted him was two weeks ago. He sent a meme on social media, said "hi, how are you?" and kept up a basic conversation that fell flat after two messages.
'LOL. How are you?' Chuuya texted back, and Dazai answered 'studying. all okay.' and that was that.

Dazai never followed up with a proper hook, and that made Chuuya want to answer even less because it sounded like he wasn't truly interested in keeping the conversation. They ghosted each other again.

He scowls, meeting the beady eyes of the teddy bear sitting in a corner of the attic.

It's covered in dust, but his eyes look familiar. Black, round, glossy eyes that seem to smile. And it's *then* that Chuuya hears it.

'Took you a while, Slug,' — uttered in that sing-song tone that makes Chuuya's heart sing with relief.

A 'welcome home' said around a summer-bright smile.

"Hi, 'Samu," he says back.

It's merely a whisper – as if the wrong approach might wake up the demons in the attic. As if speaking too loud might melt the lump that settled in Chuuya's chest into tears. The wooden floor creaks as he walks through the room, breathing thick dust, and reaches for the teddy bear. He takes it in his arms, breathing in the smell of sunlight, pulling it close to his chest.

His secret, the one no one knows, is that he can't stop losing his best friend. They never talk. They never see each other.

And maybe Chuhya is *lame* for clinging to that part of his childhood he refuses to let go.
What's the point of fooling around with Shirase, if he can't stop thinking that he misses his best friend even with his boyfriend?
He'd much rather be playing video games with Dazai than sharing sloppy kisses with anybody else.

So, yes. It sucks to be Chuuya. It sucks to be fifteen.

—

[A week after Chuuya moved to Yokohama]

"Ah, this might be my unlucky night. I didn't expect to run into *Chuuya* here~"

Chuuya doesn't answer as Dazai stops by his side, trench coat floating around his lean legs and beige trousers, resting one arm on the white bustrade of the promenade in Minato Mirai. He expected a reaction once he approached the redhead, but he gets nothing.

Chuuya barely acknowledges his presence at all. He looks like he rolled out of the house in his Pajamas, tufts of baby hair escaping his bun, as he's staring at the skyline painted in the water — the lights, the moon reflected in the tranquil surface of the ocean at night. Then he sighs, slumping a little against the white iron handrail. Dazai remembers a time when Chuuya didn't even *reach* any balustrade at all, and he would bug Verlaine or Rimbaud to heave him up to let him look past.

He and Chuuya started living together seven days ago. Seven days of adjusting. Seven days of silences, of fights, of— *things* Dazai can't find a way to describe. He is still walking on eggshells around his old best friend. Nothing is as it used to be.

They bicker too much, and can't talk for more than two minutes without getting caught up in a screaming match.

"What are you doing here, Dazai?" He asks eventually, casting a glance at as if Dazai has no right to occupy his same neighborhood.

He has a way of asking things, Chuuya, as if he expects to be disappointed by Dazai's answer. He wonders when that became the case. When did they start expecting the worst from one another.

"What do *you* think I was doing?"

Chuuya snorts, resting his chin on the balustrade. "I don't know. Plotting something evil."

"Wrong, wrong~ I had a date," he answers. "The red brick warehouses nearby are a popular dating spot, did you know?"

"Ah. Are they?" Chuuya's timbre sounds distant, as if he's shaping his words through a dream. As if his mind is wandering elsewhere — another place far away from Yokohama, from Paris even. Another place where Dazai isn't allowed anymore.

Thinking about it, of course Chuuya doesn't know that Minato Mirai is popular for crepes and dating. *Of course.* He hasn't lived in Yokohama for a full week, yet.

But what Dazai wants him to know — what he won't say — is that he would take Chuuya on all the dates in the world, and he would buy him all the crepes. He would take his best friend somewhere else, a place where they can see the lights reflected in the ocean and be alone.

A place where he *could* do something about these simmering feelings that keep him awake at night.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend," Chuuya says, finally turning to look at him. The comment sounds weirdly empty but Dazai ignores it, distracted by the city lights reflected in Chuuya's eyes. They look almost purple in the night. How they *shine*. "You could have told me."

He swallows. "Why?"

"Because we live together, so I don't wanna be in your way or shit."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"You said it's a popular dating spot," Chuuya volleys back, both eyebrows arched and voice loaded with sarcasm.

"I had a date with a girl. I do *not* have a girlfriend. That's all."

Chuuya hums, nonplussed. "I see," he says, and Dazai wonders what the other is truly thinking.

He prefers to torture himself with the doubt, because the idea of Chuuya calling him a fuckboy to his face terrifies him. It would break his heart.

"You know, shitty Dazai, I gotta admit that I don't understand you. And before today, I sure as hell didn't like Yokohama one bit."

Dazai's breath stutters, not expecting the outright admission — fearing that it might mean that Chuuya will leave again. Thinking that Chuuya loathes living with him. "And the the first thing I asked myself this morning, and yesterday, is: *what the fuck am I doing here?"*

"Did Chuuya find an answer?" He prompts, under his breath. Hoping against hope Chuuya won't leave him. Not again.

"I'm not sure. But I like living with you, and I like not being a thousand hours away from my sister, and I like this spot here. How the lights brighten up the sea… it reminds me of home."

Dazai's heart hiccups.

"Home," he echoes, not sure where to place that word. Yokohama became his home — and the Kokiden Foundation, too, although Chuuya knows nothing of it. If they keep up like this, Chuuya will *never* hear about Dazai's years locked up, wasting away. Dreaming of him. "I haven't thought about that concept in a while."

Where is Chuuya's home, after all? Is it Paris, is it Kyoto?
Does he miss it?
Does he suspect at all that Dazai's home is a fragmented concept of disillusioned broken dreams?

Glancing at him, Chuuya raises an eyebrow. "Is everything alright?"

"Hm'm."

"Ya sure?"

"Why does Chuuya ask?"

"You look weird all of a sudden. Like you might cry or something."

"I'm fine." He wets his lips, allowing nostalgia to seep into his voice — into his eyes. He takes in the nightly breeze, and his feet might be firmly planted on the pavement but his smile is dedicated to a time far away, one he wishes he could bring back.

"You know, you really didn't change one bit, Chuuya." *Call me 'Samu again. Take me home.* But he just pushes away instead, starting to walk toward the house he shares with his best friend. "I'll see you at home."

—

[Present Day]

Since the funeral Chuuya has started to pick at his fingers.

He always begins with the thumb. Then, once he has peeled off the first pale, semi-transparent layer of skin around the nail, digging into the flesh until it becomes red and raw, he moves on.

He got used to the pain surprisingly quickly.

Now the soreness grounds him, allowing him to organize his mind

into hard-nosed, objective, *productive* lists: he's an adult, and he needs to start making sense of his responsibilities. He needs to help his dad. He'll have to go back to class, because his master degree won't finish itself. Go to work. Exist. Breathe. Support his sister and his father.

He needs to be strong , rinse and repeat.

So, while he re-learns how to exist whilst crippled of one of the pillars of his very existence, dealing with a wobbly house of sand that has no foundation anymore, Chuuya navigates through enough commitments to keep his mind busy.
He stuffs his days with the Flags and Fyodor and everything he can think of. He jogs. He works. He calls Sigma. He loads up his nights with Dazai's presence to make sure he'll tire himself out, forcing his body into an uncertain rest.

He'll keep running in circles until he drops — and, when he *finally* gets a moment to talk to his sister, he hasn't slept properly in three days and hasn't managed to keep food in his stomach for two. But he is *smiling.* He's surprised at how normal he looks in the mirror.

"Hey," he calls for Mitsuru when they bump into each other in the garden. She's wearing a nice flowery dress, and a full face of makeup. "Going somewhere?"

"Yeah," she says, with a shrug. "I have my therapist appointment, and then a date. I need a breather, you know? And to get in the right headspace. I need to…" She hesitates, letting the conversation fall. He understands. There are a *lot* of things he would need too, and they're all unattainable. "Whatever. How are you?"

"Fine. Went for a morning jog."

"Nice. The streets are empty at this hour."

He nods. The chitchat gnaws away at his nerves. "Yeah, I guess they are."

"You look good," Mitsuru says.

"I *feel* good."

"You sure you don't want me to book an appointment for you, too?"

"Huh? For what?"

“The therapist,” she says, with an exasperated edge. As if Chuuya just proved a point he didn’t know she was making.

Chuuya scrunches his nose. “Oh, that? Don’t know. I didn’t remember you going to therapy anyway.”

“I told you the other day. Odasaku’s referral? And I asked if you wanted to come?”

Oh, he thinks, as the knowledge washes over him — and he has a feeling he’ll forget again, too. His nail finds his thumb. He starts scratching.
“Oh,” he replies, just to reiterate. “I don’t remember.”

What *does* he remember about the last few days, exactly? The nightmares. The efforts to keep himself focused on everything but himself; Dazai, pressing him against the mattress, fucking him so he’d be tired enough to fall asleep.

“Think about getting a therapist,” Mitsuru insists. “I know you’ve got it, but it’s a lot.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“You know you can talk to me and Dad, right?”

Chuuya waves the question away. Short answer is: *no.*
He can’t, or he’ll end up relying on someone, allowing shame to slither up his arms the second he wastes someone’s time with his venting.

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t need to.”

His nail sinks in the flesh of his thumb. Scratch. *Scratch.*

“You sure? You have been weirdly calm since…”

She can’t say it. Good, Chuuya thinks, because he can’t *hear* it. “I’ve got it.”

“Chuuya. You’re grieving , you shouldn’t have to get anything at all.”

She crumples her lips as if the conversation and Chuuya’s stomach drops.
Panic takes over, because his answer should have reassured Mitsuru and it should have allowed him to blend into the background.
Instead it backfired, putting him on the spot.

And he wonders if Mitsuru can see it too: dad banging against the coffin, begging for air. Begging for company.

In the nights he spends awake by Dazai's side, Chuuya sees him.

Even though he registers the talking, his brain is not entirely up to speed with the sounds.

"Oi, Chuuya? Your finger is bleeding."

He swallows, wetting his chapped lips. "*Ah."*

"Are you okay?! Let me see…"

"It's just a paper cut," Chuuya whispers. He lifts the hand close to his chest, protecting it. "It's nothing. I just scratched my finger, it'll heal."

This whole life a joke, his mind tries to convince him as he lowers his gaze. A tiny stream of blood is dripping off his thumb. *It's a joke, and you don't need to process it right now. You need to process it later, you can procrastinate, you can do it tomorrow. It's a joke. A joke. Joke, joke, joke, joke.*

But there is no trace of amusement in Mitsuru's expression. "No," she states. "No. NO. Fuck this. I'm booking you a therapy appointment. And you are going."

He rolls his eyes. "Oh, don't be overdramatic—"

"I am not joking, you little shit," she answers, and she sounds so much like dad that it knocks the wind out of Chuuya's lungs. Her cadence is the same. "You're acting creepy, and you've been so calm, and..."

"It's because Dad is okay."

The comment rolls out of his lips before he can stop it, but he *entirely* expects Mitsuru to flinch. "Huh?"

"I will see dad. When I sleep."

The horror in Mitsuru's wide eyes and agape mouth makes him regret ever speaking at all. "Chuuya," she murmurs. *"No.* Sweetheart, no."

"Dad is going to be okay, and so am I."

It brings out the worst of him, grief. It excoriates the chrysalis he built around himself, and suddenly he is painfully aware of the

heavyweight responsibility in his hands — urging him to make the most of the time he has on earth.

“The dead don’t come back to life,” Mitsuru says.

“I know,” he whispers. “Of course they don’t. I’m not an idiot.”

She scowls. “There’s no one calling you an idiot.”

Chuuya moves his hands into his pockets, hiding them to conceal his contused flesh and tensed veins. The red on his thumb dries out, a drought river in summer.
He scratches it away, blood turning to dust, and moves to his index finger. He picks at the cuticle.

“Look, I’m… I know it must seem odd, but I’m feeling weirdly alright, so I’m happy to be here for you and Dad,” he murmurs, with an insistence that must sound pitiful. He’s shivering, too. *Damn it.* He gnaws at his bottom lip and picks at his skin, unable to stop his body. When Mitsuru steps forward, he steps back. “Really, Micchan, I mean it. I can go to your stupid therapist appointment, but I will process it at my own pace. You and dad can count on me.”

I beg you, count on me.

For a second, as she scans his face, Mitsuru’s eyes seem almost ink-black, revealing the first true hint of pain behind the mask of ‘*busy city girl with too many commitments to focus on her pain’.*
She expected resistance, he realizes, but not that much.

She’s crumbling, too.

Their entire fucking house is in shambles.

So he will keep it together for everybody’s sake — not because he’s *asked* to, but because he loves his family.

He’s the one who’s okay.

“I know you have a tendency to worry about everything.” With a frail smile, Mitsuru walks to him. Her hands look for Chuuya’s own, prying them out of his pockets and lacing their fingers together. She squeezes. “But I’m worried about you, too. ”

“Right.”

“Fedya, Osamu, The Flags. We are all here for you.”

Swallowing, he nods. “Right. Dazai *is* helping.”

“Sucking you off while you guys think you are being subtle is not the only way he can help, Chuuya,” she says, with a pout — and Chuuya *feels* the heat rise to his cheeks, but she cuts him off. “I get what you’re doing. I hooked up with a friend too, she’s great and she makes me feel better, so I’m not policing that. But you need to… you know, vent, too. Talk. Osamu’s there for it. And the Flags are all by your side.”

“Right.”

“I haven’t seen you cry since the funeral.”

I cry when I’m alone.
Hell, I cry under the shower every fucking night, he wants to say.
And then Dazai shows up, and we laugh and play games and he fucks the strength to be sad out of me.

But he doesn’t say any of it. “That’s not how I cope, I guess.”

“I’m worried,” she says. He squeezes back.

Shut up. You’ll be fine. You’ll see your dad soon, his brain tells him, remembering Dazai’s words.
He talks a lot with his mind, lately. And he’s grasping, and he’s reaching, and all he can do is smile at Mitsuru and lie.

“You have no reason to worry,” he says. “I promise I’ll reach out if I need to, okay?”

When he finally leaves, it feels like he’s running from an interrogation. He is running from himself, from his weakness, from the possibility that Mitsuru might hug him. If he allows it to happen, he’ll start crying for real.
He’s set on a song he doesn’t know how to sing. He’s trapped in a silence he doesn’t know how to break.

And then he’ll drown — in the tears he’s not shedding, in the darkness of a grave, in the blood spilling from his tortured fingers.

—

Following the funeral, Chuuya seems alright.

He laughs, he converses, he helps around and sees The Flags and

Fyodor and kisses Dazai like nothing ever changed. He works, jumping in on brainstorming calls that could easily wait a week or two.

He seems normal.

'*Seems*' being the key word.

Dazai knows him enough to know better. For starters, he eats almost nothing, throwing up half of what he manages to ingest. Albatross has a go at cooking for him, although to no avail. Ice Man made him congee. Dostoyevsky sent his grandmother's borsch — that, too, ends up with Chuuya on his knees over a toilet. Through it all, Dazai lingered close to him, keeping his hair up.

Through it all, Chuuya repeats he's fine. A broken record: I'm fine, I'm fine, I've got it under control. And Dazai expected him to evade questions, but things are not improving a week after the burial service and he's at a loss.

Because he and Mitsuru agree that Chuuya is not fine, and his so-called *control* is nothing but a façade.

That's how Dazai finds himself in the spacious kitchen of Verlaine's house — the house that used to belong to Verlaine *and* Rimbaud, and that no one knows what will become of it. A waft of coffee and roses welcomes him.

Like the rest of the family, the house seems suspended in time. Waiting. Holding its breath, waiting for Rimbaud to come back. Even Baki, sleeping on a chair, seems to be beetling in an eerie tranquillity.

Dazai tries not to think about it, pushing into the room and reaching for the blonde man at the sink, scrubbing a little tower of blue-and-white bowls.

The room, like everything else in the house, is much bigger than the apartment he and Chuuya share in Yokohama. Too *big* for one person alone.

"Thank you for helping around, Dazai-kun," Verlaine says. "It means a lot."

"Thank you for letting me stay," he answers. He's not sure how rapidly and steadily his mental health would decline, if he were with Mori.

“Don’t mention it. You’re family.”

“If I’m imposing—”

“Look, I don’t know what happened with Mori-sensei , and it is not my business to ask, but I know my children care about you,” Verlaine interrupts him. “That’s enough for me. It would be enough for Arthur, too.” Then he breathes, almost sighing to himself. It shatters the heartbeat of silence created by Dazai’s hesitation. “Chuuya didn’t touch any food this evening, either. It doesn’t do him any good to skip so many meals.”

“Yeah,” Dazai says. He worries too. He worries so much, he can’t look at Chuuya without anxiety tangling his stomach. “He tried to eat something. But he gave up after a bite, saying he wasn’t in the mood.”

“He can’t starve himself.”

“That’s what I tell him, too, but Chibi’s stubborn.”

Throwing his head back, Verlaine chuckles. A peal of laughter that used to be so much deeper, as if losing his husband thinned out the man’s timbre.

Dazai wonders if a scrap of Verlaine’s soul is buried with Rimbaud. He also wonders what will happen when the man’s children will be back in Yokohama, bidding goodbye to the house — to the old kitchen and the blue-painted bowls and the teddy bear with a nostalgic name locked in the attic.

“Chibi, huh? That name brings back memories, indeed.”

“Chuuya always hated it,” Dazai murmurs, shooting the man a sidelong glance.

Giving him a shrug, Verlaine divides the dishes from the dirty chopsticks. As he turns to reach for the dish soap, Dazai spots the flash of nostalgia crossing the man’s face. “Chuuya’s always been a vivacious kid. Mitsuru would hide behind Arthur’s legs and play coy, but Chuuya always said things straight. But when it comes to you… No. He never really *hated* that name.”

“I know,” he admits. “Or I would have stopped a long time ago.”

“Chuuya has a teddy bear. Arthur and I still keep it.”

"*Samu.*"

Verlaine nods. "Would you like to take it to Yokohama? Chuuya might…"

He might want it.

"Yes," Dazai answers with all his chest before Verlaine can finish, noticing his embarrassment in implying that his grown-up son might need the comfort of an old toy. "Yes, that would be lovely."

If he has to be honest, Dazai never understood Paul Verlaine.

He never quite got if the man hated him, or simply hoped for a better company for his son. He sure as hell never fathomed the man would consider him *family*.

"Good. *Good.* You two boys sure are close."

"I wouldn't just say close," Dazai says, not a single inch of hesitation in his voice. *Close* seems somehow reductive. "I mean— yes, we are close. That's not *all* we are, though. We're more than that."

"So Chuuya told me."

"We learned something, in all these years apart."

Verlaine arches one eyebrow. "I sure hope so."

"I love Chuuya, Verlaine-san."

Part of him hopes Verlaine won't feel uncomfortable after that confession, yet he can't bring himself to care too much about what's proper and what's not. Chuuya's dad should understand that feeling of absolute devotion, of being fated and designed to be together.

Chuuya's dad— who just *lost* his husband.
Great. *Right.*
He's a tactless idiot. Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to say, but his anxious heart quiets down as the soft curve of Verlaine's lips relaxes.

I know you do, his somber smile seems to say.

When Verlaine hums, it sounds amused. "If that's the case, Dazai-kun, couldn't you please convince my son to eat something?"

"Sure. I've tried already, though."

“Would you mind giving it another try? He *listens* to you.”

For a moment, Dazai weighs his possibilities.

He studies the fine lines and barely visible wrinkles that paint Verlaine’s beauty — his ice-cold irises and the lightless smile that opens like a laceration on his sleep-deprived face. He shakes his head. And yet, Dazai can’t begin to imagine the thoughts that truly cross Verlaine’s mind. Interpretation will be his downfall.

“Of course,” he murmurs. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Oi, I said I’m not hungry. I want a glass of wine.”

“You can’t get drunk.”

“Can’t I? Try me.”

“Chuuya～”

“‘Samu.”

Dazai holds onto the plate, willing himself to not *yield* despite the chokehold the nickname has over him.

Despite the blood quickly shooting to his head — specifically to a pulsating blood vessel in his temple — he tries to keep himself collected, elegantly crossing his legs while handing Chuuya a bowl of homemade broth.

(Yes, he cooked.

Yes, he *thinks* it’s edible.)

Chuuya looks at him with a stubborn pout, sitting crossed-legged in the bed.

Carefully, as he moves closer, Dazai pushes away the redhead’s laptop with one hand, ignoring that it’s frozen on a video recording of Paris’ Fashion Week 2019. Comme des Garçon, reads the title; Spring-Summer ‘19. He should scold Chuuya for working even when he should be recovering, yet he decides to pick his battles. Food first; work later.

You need to be smart about it, Dazai, he tells himself, *and patient.*

Good masters know how to trick their dogs into behaving, and the world shall know that Dazai Osamu is a *great* dog-master.

He's the ultimate Slug-tamer.

"Chuuya." He sighs, adjusting at Chuuya's bedside. He moves with just enough care to not spill the soup. "Wine is not food."

"Aren't you supposed to be a genius? Everything that can get into my mouth is food."

"I shall let you know that you're only spared a dick joke because of the situation," Dazai says, chipper. "Besides, 'everything that gets in a mouth' is not exactly the textbook definition of food."

"A pity, I guess, that it's not what my personal dictionary says."

"You mean the Nonsensical Chibi-Japanese dictionary?"

Chuuya nods. "Surely better than The stinky Mackerel-Japanese one."

Glaring at his boyfriend, Dazai clenches the bowl with a tinge of exasperation and allows the ball to drop.

Damn. *Damn.* He's out of his comfort zone and doesn't know what to do. He's not great with making people eat. Normally, Odasaku *forces him* to eat.
The one of balanced nutrition and a healthy diet was never a battle Dazai deluded himself he could win — he's no champion himself — but he is going to try.

If Odasaku has convinced him that there's life beyond canned crab, then he can at least try to talk Chuuya into eating something more or less solid. Something that doesn't include *grapes.*

"Okay," he caves in, bottom lip jutted out. "Tell me what you want."

Chuuya gives him a puzzled look. "What?"

"Tell me what you want in exchange for a single spoon of his soup, and I'll give it to you."

"Anything?"

"Everything." He promises, head bobbing down in a nod. "I will walk

to a kombini right now if I have to."

Chuuya huffs. "Don't be dramatic."

"I mean it. I'll do everything you want." Also because his arms are going numb, and his anxiety spikes every time he remembers he can drop said soup and make a mess. "I will even go fetch 'Samu from the attic. We can have a sleepover."

"Then it sucks, I guess, because I really just don't feel like eating," Chuuya replies, pursing his lips in a pout that reminds Dazai of when they were younger. It reminds him of those simpler days that had been kind to Chuuya. "I'm not hungry. It's not that deep."

"At this rate, you're going to pass out."

"Then call me fucking Cinderella and kiss me awake, I don't know what to tell you."

Dazai chuckles. "It's Snow White," he hums, and laughs louder when Chuuya throws up his arms.

"You got what I meant, smartass," he answers, sticking out his tongue.

"What if I bring you one of those drinks with orange juice and ice cream? I'll also allow Mitsuru to spit in it," Dazai carries on, pointing his index finger up in the air. With a tinge of satisfaction, he notices Chuuya's attitude budging. "Or maybe I should refrigerate your red wine…"

Sheer horror pools in Chuuya's eyes. "Bastard!"

"If you don't want to deal with that, try to be a good adult and eat up."

The moment those words leave his mouth, Dazai realizes the stupidity of his request. Nakahara Chuuya is a shrimp. A *baby* shrimp. And shrimps can't be asked to act like people.

Chuuya proves it when he arches one eyebrow, chin jutting toward the bowl. Gingerly, he straightens up, sitting with his back against the bed's headboard. The light in the bedroom makes his ashen complexion and reddened eyes seem ghostlike, but the fire behind his irises still burns bright.

"Oi—" A tinge of hesitation. "—You really made this stuff?"

Dazai nods, ignoring the wariness in the question. In response, Chuuya screws up his face. He doesn't even try to disguise the fact that he expects the soup to explode or self-combust at any moment.

"For real? You?"

"Yeah. Well, it was a team effort— myself and three different YouTube tutorials. None of them were useful."

"But you can't cook for shit."

"I applied my numerous soft skills and three degrees to take proper care of my favorite dog," he replies.

Chuuya allows the jab to fall flat.

He just gives Dazai an empty, glassy smile — his lips may be stretched, but the quietness he flaunts looks so *dialogical* that Dazai would want to scream.

Chuuya is not a happy person: he's an interpretation of what a happy person would look like in the eyes of a deeply sad one.
Doll-like.
He's seen Chuuya smiling before, and that's not it. Now he has chasms in the sea blue of his irises. Still waters; deep and sinister, shark-infested.

And, even if Dazai out of all people can recognize a mask when he sees one, he doesn't know what to do to breach the other's defenses. What do people say? How do they console each other? What should he do, what does Chuuya *want* him to do?

In silence, as words escape his grasp, Dazai drives his boyfriend in for a kiss on the forehead. He presses tender lips against the cold, smooth skin of Chuuya's face, listening to his quiet breathing.

He stays there for a moment, with Chuuya dead-still under his mouth, before letting the redhead go. Then, he settles the bowl of soup between them.

"Eat," he murmurs, "please."

"Make me," Chuuya answers. It's not a refusal, this time, but a challenge. The subtle encouragement hidden under the cocky tone coaxes a smirk out of Dazai.

“Afraid of being poisoned, Slug?”

“With you? Always. You burned rice in a goddamn rice cooker.”

When Dazai blows his cheeks, it’s entirely boyish and only for the sake of Chuuya’s subtle laugh. “It was a malfunctioning rice cooker.”

“It sure as hell wasn’t malfunctioning before *you* got your dirty, house-appliances-killer paws on it.”

“If you’re going to be a smartass shrimp about it, then you can starve.”

“Huh? And here I thought you were going to feed me,” Chuuya volleys back. “After all, you are the one treating me like I need a babysitter.”

It’s provocative and petty, but Dazai has no intention of weathering a tiny, petty shrimp talking back at him.

He takes a moment to look at Chuuya, gauging his attitude — and the pain that taints his usually bright smile. He studies the way Chuuya’s hair falls to his shoulders in tangled locks of fiery red. His pasty complexion, his purple under-eye despite the fact that he’s getting *more* sleep than usual. Sleep, but not rest.
He looks exhausted, unkempt. His t-shirt lost its original shape, baring his collarbone.

Then, Dazai shifts closer.
“Because you do need a babysitter,” he replies, in a whisper. It’s gentle, though.

“I’m not sick,” Chuuya insists.

“You are sick in the brain, Slug.” He might say that, but his eyes shine with tender amusement as he takes an encouraging spoonful of soup.

“You’re sick in the brain t— oi, what are you doing?”

“Spoon-feeding you.”

“No way. I was joking.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Yes, and that’s final. I won our last bet, so I’m calling in my bet-winner privilege.”

He sees Chuuya's lips part as he stares at the spoon with amazed intensity.

'Samu, what the fuck? He asks without words.
Winner privileges are a big thing between them: they set bets and the winner can ask the other anything and everything. Normally, the orders revolve around pinballing house chores between one another. But now Dazai can almost hear Chuuya's question in the loud silence that stretches between them: *why? Why would you waste a win on me?*

A part of him is still amazed that Chuuya has yet to learn that no win is lost on him, on them.

However, the redhead's usual smirk is back in place a moment later. His shoulders slack. His posture relaxes only just.

"So what are you hesitating for, Mackerel?" Chuuya nudges, scooting closer. "Are ya gonna feed me, or are you going to eat that soup yourself?"

Dazai's grin sharpens. "Open that mouth or I'll stick the spoon in your ear."

He didn't expect Chuuya to frown and dutifully part his lips, but that's what he does.

It must be a Christmas miracle— well, one kind of out of season, but Dazai will take it anyway — because Chuuya's collaboration doesn't come easily. Still, winner privileges are absolutes, and a cornerstone of their friendship. They wouldn't disrespect them or try to escape a bet.

And his efforts are certainly not enthusiastic, but Dazai supposes he can work with what he's given.

"Be careful not to get the blanket dirty," Chuuya hums.

"You be careful." Dazai grimaces, sinking the spoon in the soup and blowing on.

"…I can blow on my own spoon. I'm not a child."

"Can you be quiet? I'm busy."

"You're blowing on a *fuckin'* spoon, you're not busy!"

“And if you talk, you’ll drool all over like the slobbering dog you are."

“Oi, I don’t drool!”

“Can you stop fighting it for five seconds?”

“Hah?! How am I the problem, now? You called me a dog and a child in the same breath!”

“That’s because I love you~” Dazai sing-songs.

He expected to have to cram the spoon into Chuuya’s mouth, hoping that a bite of piping hot soup would force him to shut up, but that comment seems to silence him. *That’s because I love you.* With that, Chuuya drops the attitude.

In response, Dazai finds himself moving with infinite gentleness as he stretches the spoon to Chuuya’s mouth. His wrist quivers as the redhead’s lips welcome the spoon, closing around it in a loaded silence.

Chuuya’s eyelashes tremble, casting shadows over his pale cheeks. His freckles look like stars dotted on his skin: strawberry-hued, scattered, ever-changing galaxies.

Dazai half-expected Chuuya to clap back with a joke, but the other just accepts the spoon and swallows the soup. One more scoop. And another. And another.

Not a single comment, just the subtle sounds of the spoon sinking into the bowl.

Basking in the sense of suspension, of *quietness,* Dazai realizes that there is an odd sense of *symmetry* in the way he got used to taking a spoonful of thick brown soup, moving in synch with Chuuya. He’ll blow on it and reach for his boyfriend’s lips. Chuuya leans forward; parts his lips; forces himself to swallow.
They just learned this dance of perfect consonance, and yet they might have been dancing it all their life.
The same harmony oozes from the way Chuuya has lowered his shoulders so he can meet Dazai halfway, eyes half-closed and lips slightly parted. It’s amazing and awkward and intimate.

Half-plate in, Chuuya shoots him a side glance, cheeks reddened. “Thank you,” he murmurs, under his breath.

“So?” Dazai asks, just to exorcise the warmth creeping up his neck. “Does it taste edible?”

Chuuya flashes him a tiny smirk. “Ya need to ask? Ah, I knew you were trying to poison me.”

“I swear I’m not trying to poison you.”

“Then what do *you* think it tastes like?”

Well. If Dazai is being honest, it will probably taste like burned greens and excessive soy sauce and something that YouTube Recipe Number 3 suggested; thyme. It *sounded* like something that would go in a soup, so he didn’t ask too many questions.

Besides, Dazai is not the kind of man who admits his shortcomings — cooking is a skill he’s still refining. Meaning: he’s refining the ancient art of trying all the takeaway restaurants in Yokohama, avoiding any form of kitchenware as if his life depends on it.

Odasaku is the one who can cook, anyway. He’s good at it.

“It tastes like awesomeness and greatness, since yours truly made it,” Dazai says, with a happy skip in his voice. He wonders what it would sound like if he were *really* happy. “It was worth it, by the way.”

Chuuya grins, and it somehow looks feral. “Oh? Was His Highness of Mackerels worried for me?”

“Would it be really *that* surprising if I were?”

“What’s with you all? I’m really okay.”

“I’m sure you are,” he answers, and he means it. “But I need you to talk to me.”

“About what?”

“About you,” he answers.

With a tch, Chuuya shrugs as if the idea disgusts him. “There’s nothing to say about me, whatever the hell that means.”

Is that so? Because I could spend lifetimes talking about you, Dazai thinks.

But Chuuya's skittish answer also causes him to halt because he knows this fear — the need to hide away when the entire world is asking you

to get exposed. To scream your pain.
And Mitsuru can grill Chuuya for an answer, if she so pleases; Dazai won't. Because he doesn't need Chuuya to *speak* to hear him.

Lips twitching up, careful not to drizzle soup all over the clean sheets, Dazai retreats and settles the plate on the nightstand.

"Very well," he assures. "I won't pressure you. I need a shower now, and then we can cuddle and Chuuya can tell me everything about how he wants to spend the night. Come here." He leans in first, though. Chuuya's lips taste salty when he kisses them, and they part like petals of a flower — a flower Dazai has spent his life searching for, and that he fears might slip away before he can do anything about it. "I'll be back before you notice."

Chuuya inhales against his mouth. He's smiling. And that smile is a *hideaway,* and Dazai has no business calling it out. "Interesting. Can I join?"

"No, you may not."

A gasp. *"Why?"*

"Because I need an actual shower, Chibi. I *stink* of broth."

"That you do." He laughs softly. The sound vibrates against Dazai's chest, silencing everything else in him. "Not that I mind."

"Oh, you don't? You must be getting old, then~ Everybody knows dogs have a sensitive sense of smell."

"Yeah, fuck you too."

He laughs. Chuuya does too. Neither of them sounds truly, fully committed to it.

But the truth is that Dazai means it, when he states that he needs a break. He feels terrible about it — selfish and cruel and immature — but the situation is taking a toll on him. Hikaru texting him if *he's fine*, assuming he's not, is not helping either. "I'm not saying I'm not tempted, you know. But Mitsuru called us out big time, and we can go one day without sneaking away. I don't want your dad to kick me out because I'm sullying his only son," he says. It's a lie, but it's also the only excuse Dazai can hide behind right now. "You should get some rest in the meantime."

Chuuya nods. “I’m sorry for being so—” He gestures at the soup, and at the room, and Dazai already grimaces because he can guess the word before it leaves Chuuya’s mouth. “—High maintenance.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I’m gonna get a grip soon, I promise.”

“You don’t have to. No one is here saying ‘ *Chuuya is such a weak Chibi,’* Slug. It’s just in your head, you know,” he assures. “I’ve got you.”

I see you, he means. *And I would never judge you.*

“Right. Thank you.”

“I’m going to leave the soup here. Try to finish it, please?”

Chuuya smiles a tired smile. “Will try,” he assures, but it’s weak. “Stop bugging me, ya Mackerel.”

It’s enough, though.
As long as Chuuya allows him to bear *some* of his pain, then it’s enough.

As Dazai steps away from the bed and strides to the door, he notices how the redhead swallows slowly and grips the sheets. He bites his lips and holds back as if he shouldn’t be allowed to mourn.

Maybe, after all, they are still children. Damaged, desperate children who want nothing but to take advantage of the situation to get their hands under each other’s clothes.

As he walks out, Dazai allows Baki in. The cat meows at him, dragged and laconic, as if he’s judging the shit job Dazai is doing at supporting his boyfriend. “You want to go to Chibi?” He asks the cat, squatting down to scratch Baki between the ears. As the cat lets out another purring sound, he finds himself smiling.

Inhaling deeply from his nose, he tells himself that everything is going to be alright. Chuuya is going to be fine. Mitsuru is going to be fine.

And he—

He just needs to wait until everyone is asleep. Because what he needs are dreams that he can only experience wide awake. Dreams he can only find at the footnote of the darkest page of human sin.

And water will wash away the blood and dirt, burning away his earth-born lethargy.

—

[Two weeks after Chuuya moved to Yokohama]

"Slug, I'm bo-*oooo*-ored~ What are you doing?"

"Cooking."

With a pensive *hmm* Dazai saunters forward. He lodges his chin on the top of Chuuya's head, dutifully ignoring the groan he gets in return. "Oh? Cooking what?"

"Soup," Chuuya answers, without looking at him.

"What kind of soup? Is it crab?"

"Soup." Harder, this time.

So it's annoyed soup, Dazai thinks. *Don't-talk-to-the-angy-shrimp* soup.

In the initial weeks of sharing his house with Chuuya, Dazai has realized two things.

First, Chuuya is responsible, no-nonsense and poised. He wants people to rely on him. He *needs* people to need his advice, and to notice his big lipgloss-shiny smile and rock'n'roll outfits. He's also a great cook, because god forbid Nakahara '*Rockstar among peasants'* Chuuya is not stellar at anything — socially speaking or otherwise.
He's a lapdog through and through.

The second thing is: Now-Chuuya is different from the Past-Chuuya Dazai remembers.

He doesn't know how to feel about it, caught between a sense of jealousy for the child he used to know and the man he's just learned to discover. Even more incredibly, Chuuya turned out a completely different adult from the one Dazai *predicted* he'd be.

That's just life, Odasaku told him. *It's never what you expect.*

Dazai hates it.

The only thing that never changed are the sparks setting off in Dazai's chest whenever he thinks of Chuuya.

"Please do not waste too many words on me, Slug," Dazai jokes in return, sporting a smile that drops the moment Chuuya turns to throw a glance behind his shoulder. He's *glaring.*

"Your latest girl forgot her earrings in the bathroom this morning."

"Oh," he says.

That would explain the silent treatment — but not the food.

"If you have to bring a different stranger to the apartment every day, at least tell them to collect their shit."

"Right. It won't happen again."

"And at least-*least* get her earrings back."

"I don't normally call my dates after a mediocre night, but I *might* remember her class," he hums.
It's meant to be a joke, but he realizes too late that Chuuya is not laughing.

"Fuck's sake, Dazai."

He puts some distance between himself and the redhead. "I'm sorry, Chibi," he says, surprised at how genuinely he means the apology. "Are you mad?"

"No, of course not. But I'm not happy about it either — I guess I'm still getting used to the idea of you having a *busy* life." The answer is uncharacteristically quiet, almost strengthless. "You used to hate chaos and strangers."

"I was ten," Dazai replies. Slowly, *quietly.* "Things change."

"How?"

"Hooking up with strangers is easier. No expectations, no feelings."

Chuuya sighs. Dazai can see unspoken doubts written all over the man's pout, dotted along the lines of his silences. "Fine. Fair. I disagree, but it's really none of my business."

I would revolutionize my life for you, though. "Yeah, I suppose we both need some time to adjust."

"It's pretty weird that my former best friend has a life I know nothing about," Chuuya admits. Dazai wonders if he knows how deeply that 'former' cuts. It brings back the anxiety of a birthday party that he skipped against his will, and all the promises Mori threw at him but never kept. "Especially when said person has a terrible reputation."

"Are you saying you're envious of my charms and popularity, Slug? Because that's what I'm hearing~"

"Sure— You got called an asshat in front of the faculty the other day."

"That was just a temporary disagreement. And how would Chuuya know about that, anyway?"

"Micchan filmed the scene and sent it to me."

"What!? What's with this betrayal? Micchan should be on my side!"

Saying that, he also slaps a hand on his mouth for dramatic effect — damn, he *really* deserves an Oscar — but Chuuya dismisses it with a roll of his eyes. "She is, you whiny baby. But I'm just saying that I don't know you. Not anymore."

"Right back at you," Dazai argues.

It comes out weaker than he intended but, from the way Chuuya nods, they are on the same page. They are back to step zero, back to getting to know each other because there are just so many conversations that can be started over a shared memory from elementary school.

"Exactly, thanks for proving my point. So you *are* as smart as they say, Shitty Dazai."

"You think that's an insult? Why, I *knew* that all that eyeshadow had messed with Chibi's brain."

"Respectfully, fuck you." He pauses to roll his eyes at the ceiling when Dazai sticks out his tongue. He looks mildly amused, though. "But yeah, I thought I could cook and we might have dinner together — since we live in the same house and all."

"Chuuya made *us* dinner?" He echoes, arching an eyebrow. That is

definitely new. “As in, for me too?”

“We can eat, and we can catch up — Papa always says that a meal is a nice time to reconnect, talk about our day or whatever.”

“My day was terrible.”

“And I’m happy to hear about it, asshole. Really. Unless you have plans or another girl, or something else.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t,” he assures, a little too quickly. A little too enthusiastic, maybe, but he decides he doesn’t care. “I would love to.”

“I guess you can pick a movie.”

“Or we could play video games, too. I still owe Chuuya a rematch.”

“Nice,” Chuuya says, head bobbing down.

“Nice,” Dazai replies.

That seems to end the conversation.

In his mind, though, Dazai is already leaning forward – he’s grabbing Chuuya’s waist, making the redhead spin on his heels as if they were slow dancing in the kitchen. He would pull him in. He would savor the moment.

He’d kiss Chuuya’s lips. And they would become waves and stars and infinite.
Dazai would feel better, and he’d float away, because he can’t stand Chuuya looking at him like they can’t be best friends ever again.

If only he had enough courage, he would tell Chuuya everything that happened: the hospital, the pills and the attempts, the days when he held a razor blade more often than a toothbrush.
He would explain how he got out of the Foundation; how he tiptoed through his own existence, begging Mori for a scrap of faith, terrified of a relapse. Eventually, thanks to Odasaku and Mitsuru, he forgot about being scared every day.

With Chuuya’s lips on his own, he would tell his best friend about the nightmares, about the solitude, the pressure. They’d make everything right.

Dazai braces himself and leans forward.

Almost there, he thinks. *Maybe it's the right time.*

However, when Chuuya blinks at him with puzzled surprise, a piercing wave of panic stops him. A sense of risk, of *uncertainty,* encourages him to pick the safe route.

He still takes a moment to marvel at how perfectly his best friend's chin fits in between his fingers. How sweetly his breath ghosts over Dazai's bandaged wrists.

Then, Dazai's thumb skims over the corner of the other's mouth.

Chuuya stands under him, frozen. His lips quiver under Dazai's hand, and he can feel the heartbeat under his touch.

He can see his future in Chuuya's eyes.

If he were braver, he would take this chance. If he were braver, he wouldn't be content with staring at Chuuya's lips wishing he could kiss them.

'I lived a life of shame,' he would say, 'but I loved you from the very first day.'

"I really have to thank you for accepting to live with me, Chuuya," he says instead, softly, distracted by the infinite galaxy of his freckles. Then, his lips twitch up. "It's less lonely around here since you've come back."

[Present day]

Another splash of pink blood sullies Dazai's used bandages.

The rush of the scalding water in the shower explodes in his ears as his hand holds onto the tap, twisting it.

Cold. Hot. Burning. Freezing. *Grounding.*

It turns his pale skin into an expanse of screaming red.

Carefully, Dazai sneaks his fingers in the tiny alcove between the half-empty bottle of purple shampoo Verlaine forgot and the lily-of-the-valley body butter that he is not sure why is even in the shower.

Against his better judgment, he *did* open the box of razors in his suitcase. Hikaru texted him after the funeral, and asked him if he ended up using it. That reminder was all Dazai needed — and it sounded like such a good idea, at that time. Odasaku can't stop me, he thought, because Odasaku isn't here. It's just one time.

It made him feel better, it made him feel worse. But it was *never* once.

What he can tell is that relapsing is slow until it's not: it all happened in the blink of an eye, one single decision jeopardizing years of perseverance.

He's not sure why hurting himself tunes down his demons, but it *does.* Should he feel guilty? Should he—

"Because I love you, 'Samu."

Violently, stuttering under the weight of the *responsibility* that those words carry, Dazai twists the tap. Ice-cold water splashes over his aching back, numbing his tortured arms.

Every inch of his body burns. Every centimeter of his skin is covered in cuts — white and red, old and new.

His mind is clearer.

He feels better.

Chapter End Notes

> As you can see, Chuuya's grieving is a work in progress. It will continue to be explored and see through the eyes of different characters. I don't want to write pain in firsts and seconds, I want to write two people who are suffering and who stick with one another despite it all.
>
> Not even going to lie tho, today I really need validation so yes, if you want to cheer me up I would be really glad ❤

Chapter 12: Golden Ratio

Chapter Summary

> “I avenged you.”
>
> Or: Soukoku have a heartfelt conversation about trust, Chuuya is learning to navigate a new life and Hikaru causes problems. Not necessarily in this order.

Chapter Notes

> TWs for the chapter:
> - mention of self-harm (nothing described)
> - mental health issues
> - loss and grieving
> - gaslighting
>
> **I updated the tags I probably over-tagged but better safe than sorry!**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is a life before Arthur Rimbaud and a life *after* him.

The tragedy opened a rift in Chuuya’s soul, cutting his core in half like a city shaken by an earthquake. His streets are ripped apart, his conscience is strained, and his light is caught in an ever-lasting blackout.
More than two months have passed since the funeral.

Seventy days.

Seventy mornings, seventy middays, seventy nights of exhausting nightmares.

Even though his work and Master’s degree — as well as Mitsuru’s University research — forced them to return to Yokohama sooner than he would have wanted, Chuuya is glad to be home.
There’s a refreshing tranquility about sleeping in his own bed and living in his own house. Verlaine insisted on giving him ‘Samu the teddy bear, so a part of home came back with him. Mitsuru offered to take care of Baki.

And part of Chuuya is *relieved*. He is relieved to be reading his poetry books and stress-cleaning his brushes and cooking in his own kitchen.

Most of all, he's glad to be out with his friends on a weekend.

It forces him into a semblance of normality as if he's justified — almost forced — to take a break from his childhood home and the ghost he keeps seeing at the corners of his existence.

He misses feeling okay. He desperately craves an ounce of normality, for people to stop looking at him with pity in their eyes.

But he knows healing isn't linear.

The longing for guidance, for absolute love, is a particular kind of yearning that he never *considered* before losing it. Luckily, his friends know how to keep him occupied. The Flags close ranks around him, and the D.O.A gang does too.

'We are going out,' Nikolai said, 'and we'll make you laugh'. That was that.

When he and Dazai arrive at the restaurant and a waiter in a gray suit escorts them to their table, everybody is already chatting — Fyodor, Mitsuru, Hikaru, Nikolai, and Sigma. The modest arrangement fills Chuuya with unguarded warmth.

Sigma is the first to stalk across the room, enveloping him in a fast hug.

Chuuya's breath hiccups in his lungs, his heart withering in his chest as Sigma holds him close and traces patterns on his back with his full hand — palm and fingers and all. Most people are shy with their touches; Sigma is not.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he murmurs.

Chuuya stifles a sigh as he hugs him back.
It's easy to thaw in Sigma's reassuring grip. It's even easier to smile at Nikolai's efforts to cheer up the entire party.

Fyodor addresses him next, and it's familiar. It's *safe.* "Grandma sends you and your sister hugs, too." Then, he cracks a smile, and that simple act makes Chuuya smile too. "Again."

"She looked good."

“She said the same about you.”

Melting into Fyodor’s hold, he allows himself to relax. “Thanks for rushing here and making Paris work,” he replies, tone barely above a whiff. “I apologize for the trouble I created.”

“Nonsense,” Fyodor says, a frown crossing his pale forehead as he pushes away. “Everybody in the team understood, and the makeup artist who stepped in is doing a decent job. They all send their condolences. You have to worry about exactly nothing.”

“I didn’t want to bother everyone.”

“Again, this is nonsense — you didn’t bother anyone, sholnishko.” His thumb skims across Chuuya’s hand, pressing at the center of his palm. Warmth radiates from that simple contact, like a flower blooming from the snow. “Leave work to me. Take care of yourself and your sister. Everything else comes after.”

“Thanks.”

“If you need anything that is in my power to solve, come straight to me. Alright?”

Hazy, Chuuya nods. “Right. Thanks.”

“I still want to introduce you to Rod, you know.”

The magic happens again: Fyodor offers him a sharp smile, and Chuuya does the same. He misses Baki, and he needs a good dose of pet therapy. “Your pet rat? I’d love to. I can swing by your house someday.”

“Anytime. My house is open to you, *solnishko* — always.”

“When he says ‘my house’ he means my couch, for the record,” Nikolai cries back.

“Sure. In an apartment *I* own and let you keep.”

“Because you are the bestest friend ever, Fedya~”

“Bestest is not an actual word,” Dazai hums.

The back-and-forth makes everything seem well, for a split second. All seems ordinary.

Next, Chuuya turns to Hikaru. Dazai invited him. Once again, he takes a moment to be surprised at the boy's delicate beauty — his pristine light blue shirt and cream-colored slacks. His style reminds him of Dazai, only more put together.

"Hikaru," he greets, with a small nod of his head. "Thanks for coming."

In his old jeans and a loose t-shirt, after struggling with a simple shower without picking at his fingers in the interminable five minutes while he waited for the hot water, a sense of being underdressed creeps up on Chuuya.

He didn't even have the energy to put effort into his makeup.
He looks like garbage, and Hikaru's perfect look just highlights how little effort he put into the basic tasks. *That's kinda shitty,* he thinks, *you are not allowed to look this fucking good.*

But Hikaru's smile looks delicate as he takes Chuuya's hand. "Slug— I mean, Chuuya." His fingertips wrap cool and steady around the heel of Chuuya's hand. "My deepest condolences."

"Thanks," he says. Mechanically. *I'm sorry.* And *Thank you.* And *It's nothing.*

"Thanks for inviting me to hang out with your friends." Hikaru smiles a smile that seems carved in crystal. "I would have loved to meet the famous Odasaku, too."

"Dazai told me he was busy, but I'm sure there'll be more dinners," he promises. Something tells him that Hikaru might not like Odasaku, though.

"How do you feel?"

"It's difficult, but I'm lucky to have so many people around me. And I am hungry, I guess, since I haven't eaten shit in the past few weeks."

With a quiet laughter, Dazai elbows his side as he joins the conversation. "I had to spoon-feed him."

"Kinky shit right in front of my innocent eyes," Mitsuru says, letting out a weak chuckle.

The comment makes Chuuya laugh, too. It's a moment, and then he regrets it.

He wonders if he'll ever overcome the guilt that takes over him whenever the weakest wave of happiness warms his heart. He's lost in plain sight, standing in the middle of a never-ending funeral — and the room is getting emptier and emptier, but he can't move. He's staring at the coffin, eyes dry, cold and lonely. He's stuck there. But, on the outside, he chuckles.

"The only kinky shit we did was sleep till midday and eat cookies in bed," he replies. He recognizes it's a lie. Mitsuru knows it, too, but he'll be damned if he ever admits it out loud.

On cue, Dazai grabs Chuuya's hand to whisk him away from the embarrassing conversation, guiding him to their seats at the table. He finds that it's easy to follow the boy's lead and trust him when the rest of the world is tumbling down and falling apart.

Dazai knows what he needs. He gets him.

There is something serendipitous, a sense of security, about having someone around who knows him inside and out.

Throughout the dinner, Chuuya notices he's not the only one leaning on Dazai's solid presence.

The way Hikaru relies on Dazai too it's obvious enough to make Chuuya smile. It's like witnessing a duckling following a person they imprinted on. Although he seems intimidated by other people, Hikaru's personality shines when he is around Dazai.
And how beautiful it is to realize that the Dazai — who was once saved from the darkness — might be someone's Odasaku. Someone's savior.

Someone's *mentor*.

"Hikaru, are you enjoying Yokohama?" Chuuya asks, taking a bite of his salad.

"I am," he answers with a nod of his head. Black strands fall over his pale forehead, alabaster over ebony. "The food too is great, around here. I was just asking 'Samu about what he's eating and what it's called."

"Poor boy never saw a tartare in his life," Dazai adds, waving his fork. Said tartare makes Chuuya regret his decision, because it looks *good*.

Mitsuru gawks. "Seriously?"

“Oh? Have you been living in a rural area?” Sigma asks, eyebrows disappearing behind his fringe.

Hikaru gives him a distant smile

“Something like that.” The boy has been thrown in rehab centers and hopping from hospital to hospital for most of his life, according to what Dazai said. Thankfully, Hikaru also seems skilled in the art of parkouring his way out of people snooping in his past. *“Anyway,* everything here tastes fantastic. I had a bite of Samu’s dish and it’s delicious.”

Chuuya’s eyebrows shoot up, bumping his shoulder against Dazai’s. “So now you let people pick from your plate, mackerel, ha? What about the ‘not sharing food’ policy?”

“That’s because Hikaru eats like a bird, while Chuuya steals half of my plate~”

“Oi, that’s not true!”

“For such a tiny shrimp, Chuuya eats like a bear,” Dazai whines. But he also curls into Chuuya’s personal space, making sure the redhead knows there’s no malice in the comment. “Besides, if Chuuya wanted a bite from my plate, I would share it with him. Obviously.”

“Liar.”

“I promise~”

“You would not, and we both know it.”

He is not sure about what makes the conversation so enjoyable, if his boyfriend’s carefree lilt or their intertwined fingers, but he is digging the direction the night is taking. It’s going to be a good evening.

He is still beaming when Dazai kisses him — and it’s brief and tenderly slow, with the brunet’s teeth holding onto his bottom lip for just one second too long. “I would.”

“Would not,” he whispers.

“I’ll prove it to you later.”

Cupping his mouth, Nikolai boos. “Get a room, you two.”

“Tell us something, Fedya: were they always this insufferable?”

Fyodor scoffs, taking a spoonful of soup to hide a smirk. “Oh, they can be worse.”

“No wonder you moved to Russia.”

“Hey, assholes! He didn’t move because of *us?!”*

Fyodor hums, dramatically lifting a hand to his forehead. “Alas. The tension was suffocating, and I can’t be around stupidity for too long.”

“Ha?!”

“It was a necessary sacrifice for my intelligence; standing next to this kind of wanton romanticism is brutal for my I.Q.”

When Dazai smiles at him, it’s entirely unfriendly. “My, Fyodor, you should try for an Oscar.”

“So... Is there anything else you’d recommend? It’s just that I’m eager to try everything, and we don’t have any Western restaurants where my parents live,” Hikaru interjects, gesturing in the direction of his plate to return the discussion to the original topic. Chuuya welcomes the change of subject as a blessing. “And this is terrific.”

Mitsuru giggles. “That’s French cuisine for you.”

“Just don’t be like the ginger kitten here and become obsessed with it,” Sigma says, a smile dancing in his lighthearted tone. “Remember that tarte au citron and filet au vin are not personality traits.”

“Hey! Anything Au Vin is a perfectly respectable personality trait.”

Hikaru seems to not hear them at all, though, turning to Dazai. Seeking reassurance again. “For now, I asked ‘Samu about some of his favorite places in town. I’m just sorry he will have to keep me company.”

“Oh?” Mitsuru tilts her head, doe-like eyes jumping from Dazai to Hikaru. “Osamu will accompany you?”

“Well, I’m not great with exploring new cities, and he offered to help.”

“It’s a free meal~” Dazai chirps.

“Ain’t that charming?” Fyodor hisses, sporting a stiff smirk Chuuya can’t quite translate.

“I hope you’ll take it as a chance to eat anything that’s not canned crab, you menace,” he says, looking at his boyfriend with a scowl.

Cheerfully, Dazai lifts the hand that Chuuya is still holding over the table. “How can I even eat this, though, if Chibi holds my hand? I can’t eat one-handed.”

“Oh, should I let go?”

“No～”

Right, just as Chuuya thought. As a languid smile paints itself on his face, Dazai leans in to place a peck on the side of his head—an intimate display of love right under everybody’s eyes.

“Hikaru, where do you come from again?” Nikolai asks, hands interlaced in front of his face.

“Somewhere close to Kyoto. Although I am afraid I spent most of my life in specialized structures, so I lack most of the knowledge a normal person would have.” Quickly, he flashes a tiny smile in Chuuya’s direction. No, no: not him — Dazai. “That’s where we met, by the way.” He turns to Gogol swiftly, and then back to Dazai again. “We were roommates. It wasn’t easy, but ‘Samu was the only good thing in my life for a long time.”

Fyodor releases a quiet puff of air. “Dazai, let me clarify something I never quite understood,” he hums, “So you left school for—"

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Dazai cuts him off. It’s not impolite, but it *is* stern. Sharper than a blade, and just as honed. Chuuya recognizes the apparently careless attempt to hide an open wound.

He wonders if it has anything to do with all the things Dazai missed — the life he thought he would live, but that went on without him. Older and hopefully wiser, Chuuya realizes how those old wounds still bleed as his boyfriend clings to his hand as he presents to be unfazed.

Dazai’s nails bite his flesh.

“Well, that doesn’t matter,” Nikolai chirps, clapping his hands with excessive enthusiasm. “The past doesn't really matter. Let’s forget all about it, and eat until we’re sick.”

It’s almost morning outside, and Dazai stares at his cell phone as he turns in his bed.

He can’t sleep.

Maybe it was the tartare. Maybe it was the dinner. Maybe it’s the fact that he would want to hold Chuuya in the other room until their bones melt and their bodies become one.
But Chuuya didn’t invite him in, saying he’d rather sleep and hold his old teddy bear and try to see his father, and Dazai didn’t dare insist. Chuuya needs space, and that's okay.

From: Hikaru
> I’m sorry I ruined dinner. You and Chuuya make a lovely couple.
He doesn't ask why Hikaru isn't asleep.

Dazai smirks as he types a thank you.

To: Hikaru
> Btw you didn’t ruin dinner. It was nice having you.

From: Hikaru
> But I don’t think your boyfriend’s sister likes me very much.

Right, Hikaru is not exactly wrong on that. Mitsuru and Fyodor don’t like him and, as it seems, they don’t like how Dazai is handling the situation.
Fyodor looked like he was about to stab him with a dessert spoon, and Nikolai sent him a clown emoji without context after the dinner. Sigma didn’t comment, but Mitsuru called him and asked if he was alright or if he needed to talk, inviting him out for lunch the following day.

She told him she's worried.

And he knows Hikaru is a handful, but broken people are never pleasant. He tried to explain that to Mitsuru. “You’re different,” she countered, and Dazai is still not sure she was right.
He’s just better at hiding in plain sight.

From: Dazai
> Micchan *is* a dear friend. She’s just tired.

From: Hikaru
> She’s funny. I hope we can become friends if she doesn’t hate me too much

> I did not know that you didn't want to talk about KF either. Sorry if I brought that up.

Sighing, laying on his back on the mattress, he rubs a hand over his face. It's not that he doesn't want to, but… but. But. *But.*

As he moves to the bathroom, unraveling his bandages and opening the cold water in the shower, Dazai goes through every little detail of the dinner.
Ignore the impulses, he tells himself again.

Fyodor always rubbed him the wrong way. He has always made Dazai's hands itch to prove to the world he lives. And the way he hugged Chuuya tortures him. The way he acted, the way he tried to pry in his past.

His phone vibrates again when he's in the bathroom, throbbing against the glossy surface of the sink.

From: Hikaru
> Chuuya and his Russian friend seemed quite cozy.

A frown knits Dazai's eyebrows as he reads the message twice, deciding that he's going to ignore it. He doesn't want to think about it, and he doesn't care to dwell on the undertones of what Chuuya might be keeping from him.

All he knows is that the water ice-cold water biting his skin will silence his running mind.
Before he steps into the shower, his phone vibrates again.

From: Hikaru
> By the way, your Slug looked pretty. I'm glad he's doing OK.

—

Chuuya is not doing okay.

It doesn't take a genius to realize it, and Dazai would trade every single treasure in the world to know how to help.

—

Dazai can't shake off the feeling that time is running through his fingers.
He blames it on Chuuya, on the way his body and voice and deep blue

eyes make him careless. The day he met him and started their sandbox friendship, he caught the slug-bug.

Slugs. Always so annoying.

As an enthusiastic student and a devoted boyfriend, he does his best to keep up with his studies while being present for Chuuya. He goes to dinner with Mitsuru and Odasaku, he dives into work by showing up on campus sooner than anybody else. He sleeps little, but he feels *decent.*

He and Chuuya are perched on a low brick wall in an empty public park, sharing a katsu sando they grabbed from a nearby supermarket during a stroll. The swings and slide are moveless and empty, the ghastly silence echoing with the memories of children laughing throughout the summer. An oleander tree rustles in a corner, its leaves green and sharp.

If this moment were a fairytale, Dazai muses, Chuuya would be a prince. He'd be Snow White, dragged back to life with a kiss or a punch or the promise of a kinder future. All three would do. Dazai only ever longed for a reason to live; he's not picky about the nature of said reason.

"How peaceful," Dazai murmurs, shoulder pressed against Chuuya's. "School is starting again already. The end of the year is really creeping up on us and, before we know it, it'll be Christmas again. We should go to the Red Brick Warehouses together this year."

Chuuya scoots closer, wiping the crumbles of batter off his tartan trousers. Green and red tartan always complimented Chuuya's colors. "As in, a Christmas Eve date?"

"Why not? If Chuuya isn't worried about getting lost in the crowd, that is."

"Idiot," he answers under his breath, although it has no bite. *Yes,* it means, *I would go on a thousand dates with you.* "Ya know, this kind of place always brings back memories."

"Good or bad ones?"

Chuuya shrugs. "A bit of both, I guess. Like that one time when you cut yourself with the scissors, and Fyodor called you a simpleton."

Dazai groans, eyebrows disappearing behind his fringe. "Yeah, look

who was talking."

"Do you think he knew what it meant?"

"Oh trust me, he *did.* We had a dictionary competition going on."

"A—A what?"

"A dictionary competition? Every day we learned a new word that the other supposedly didn't know yet," Dazai explains, voice leveled. He never had to delineate the game out loud, and he can't blame the other for looking at him like he's insane. "Nevermind. You were too busy trading Pokemon cards with Stupid Tachi to witness our epic showdown, I'm afraid."

He earns a light punch on the forearm, but it is worth it.

"Who are you calling stupid? Don't give yourself airs, Mackerel."

"I'm calling Tachihara stupid. Besides, it's not like I can be bothered with that rat and his petty crimes."

"You literally challenged Fedya to a duel, though." Chuuya's eyebrows shoot up, and Dazai's pulse stammers; it was a lifetime before and he didn't suspect Chuuya remembered. "You shoved him, and you guys fought, and the teacher made you stay behind and clean the class all on your own."

"Chuuya stayed with me through detention," he whispers.

"You started bawling."

Ah, damn, he really did. "I was a sensitive child, okay?"

"And I couldn't leave you alone," Chuuya answers.

They both got scolded by their teacher, but they sat through it with twin pouts and hands intertwined. And now, so many years later, Dazai can't help but think that maybe those stubborn eight-year-olds knew what they wanted better than their adult selves.

Looking for the traces of the kids who used to play in the park, chasing the memories of their own childhood, Chuuya's smile stretches and turns nostalgic. He retreats behind a wall that Dazai can't break no matter how much he would like to.
A crystallized serenity. Incomplete, skin-level happiness.

“It’s hard to explain, you know?” Chuuya murmurs. “Dad likes this time of the year. And when I think about life in general, he’s always there. He used to take me and Mitsuru to the park, and he’d go to see my teachers. And then I joined the soccer club and I sucked ass, but he never missed a single competition.” He sighs, his entire body deflating as he side-eyes Dazai. “And I am *grateful* for the memories, y’know. But I’m scared I will forget, at some point, and then I will lose him all over again. I feel like the memories will get spoiled and consumed, and the more I use them the sooner they’ll disappear.” He shudders. “I’m sorry. It must sound so fuckin’ dumb.”

“You’re not dumb,” Dazai murmurs, interlacing their fingers together and giving the hand a comforting squeeze.

Chuuya’s voice may be tearing at the seams, but this is the most he ever opened up on the matter and Dazai takes it as a sign that they are moving in the right direction.
After over two months of no crying, of no complaining whatsoever, he has been waiting for this moment to happen.

“I feel fine until I don’t.”

“That’s normal, sweetheart. Grieving is a mess, but you are doing your best. That’s what matters.”

“I hate that my entire family is worried because of me.”

“They are worried *for* you. That’s different.”

“Am I doing it wrong?”

He scoots closer — as close as he can. Because, despite their differences, he knows they are going to save each other; a team, working together. “There is no way of doing this wrong, Chuuya. I swear.”

“All the time, all I keep thinking about is that I want to go home.”

Dazai frowns. “Like, our home or your father’s home?”

Chuuya hesitates, and Dazai holds onto his fingers firmly to keep him from peeling his fingers raw. He traces circles over the back of his hand. “I want to go home,” he repeats, slowly, “but I’m not sure where home is anymore.”

“*Right.*”

“I have been thinking about a change of air — maybe we should go somewhere. The hot springs in the Fuji Five Lakes region, something like that. Maybe Kinosaki. Or even further away; Europe, perhaps, so we can have a proper vacation. It’s absurd, right? I’ve known you forever, but we have gone nowhere together.”

Dazai hums, tilting his head to the side. Few things disappoint and depress him like the predictability of Mount Fuji, with the underwhelming familiarity of its passes and the boring sights. He’s not a fan of hiking, either. Actually, he’d rather ask Fyodor to tour him around Moscow while handcuffed to the man rather than spend a single day on the veranda of a mountain pass’ ryokan, glazing upon the Five Lakes and their crowded resorts. No, thank you.

And he couldn’t afford a trip now, not with university and Chuuya’s commitments, but he understands. Chuuya is looking at the future to ignore the *immediate.* So he scoots closer, seeking warmth.

“Chuuya could tour me around France,” he offers, then, hoping to bury the option of Fujigoko and never unearth it again.

“Yeah, that’d be nice. We can have a cruise through the Loire Valley castles, maybe rent bikes–” Dazai barely keeps himself from gagging. Yeah, *no*. Bikes are a hard no. “–Or we can go to Paris. See my dads’ favorite places, and I can show you where I lived and I can take you to my favorite bakery. You would love it, y’know? It’s this tiny place along the river, with light purple walls and white wooden furniture. They use fresh flowers in the mignon patisserie. And the cakes — the *cakes*.”

Quietly, Dazai slips closer. “Chuuya knows I’m always ready for cake.”

“That’s why I said you’d love it.”

“Show it to me.”

“I will,” Chuuya swears. A wishful dream that sounds like a promise. “I will find a way to take you there, so we can both get a time out from everything. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like a getaway. I like it,” he says, then he stops. *Courage, Dazai, you can do it,* he thinks, and wets his lips. “…I’m trying, Chuuya. I am.”

The beautiful thing about him and Chuuya is that they don’t need context or words. It’s a visceral kind of bond and an absolute kind of

trust. And they might playfully bicker and talk in riddles all the time, but the rare moments when their hearts connect without filters, without fears, are worth everything.

“And I’m so proud of you.”

His heart sings; it’s the redhead, now, who squeezes his hand.
He was never a man of words, Chuuya, but he always makes sure Dazai feels recognized. Chuuya’s actions make him feel at peace.
“Thank you.”

“I was thinking of making crab cakes for your bento, tomorrow. How does that sound?”

…Ah, yes. And the homemade bento.

It’s the little things, with Chuuya. It’s the unsaid.

“Can I have the little crab-shaped onigiri, too?”

“Of course.” A chuckle. “Look, we all see your efforts, okay? Mitsuru and Odasaku, too. And if anyone dares tell you it’s not enough, send them my way — I’ll punch them for you.”

“So brutish~”

“I’m serious, ‘Samu. Just tell me what to do, what you need, and I’m here.”

“In that case, on a less dramatic note, do you think we can order take out later, and—“

Chuuya hums. “—and play Mario Kart with a beer? Gotcha. I’ve already ordered crab from that nice new place you like, and got your favorite beer.”

“Ew? Is Chuuya reading my mind?”

“As if. You’re just predictable.”

“Stop it right now, please and thank you. I might think you’re in love with me or something.”

“Oi! It’s that your mackerel brain is easy to read.”

“Maybe Chuuya can see my mind because he’s a tiny fairy~”

”Ha?!”

And it’s worth living on just for that, for the things he and Chuuya *could* do. For the future that they can share.
That’s when Dazai leans forward, searching for Chuuya’s lips.

Despite the things he lost through the years, he wonders if it was all for this moment; the moment when he is finally in touch with his best friend again. The breaking of the wall, the great reunion. He can’t stop his soul from reaching out for Chuuya’s.

The embers of the recent loss still burn in the redhead’s eyes, but there’s beauty in that ache.
There’s fierce courage, there’s *love.* So much love.

And the more Dazai loves, the more his heart hurts. The more he reaches out to be heard, the more unshackled and inhuman he feels – but Chuuya brings him back again and *again,* lips soft and hands gentle as he cups Dazai’s face in his slender fingers and drives him closer.

He thaws in the infinite softness of a kiss.

And he’s lost, and he’s found.

—

He and Hikaru are smoking in the University's backyard.

Hikaru is leaning against the wall while Dazai sits on the concrete, one leg pulled to his chest and the other stretched out. It’s a bad day. He’s late for class. He doesn’t care, though, tethered to a semblance of productivity by a thin string made of caffeine and nicotine. He tips his head back as he puffs out some smoke, glancing at the sky.

Cigarettes relax him. If he could be anywhere else, he would be. On days like this one, he’d hide from himself and run away from his head.

“Do you have to go back soon?” Hikaru asks, voice roughed by the smoke. Dazai lets out a light *hm’m* of approval.

“Kind of. I have a class in five.”

“What about later?”

“Chuuya is singing at the Old World,” Dazai answers, a smile rounding his words. Chuuya. His heart wraps around the sound. *Chuuya.*

Now, that is a good reason to survive the day.

The only idea of seeing his boyfriend, even if it won't happen before a couple of hours, puts him in a good mood. The promise of Chuuya singing on stage — the scorching neon lights of the bar illuminating his winged eyeliner, his gritty voice scratching against the microphone — makes him want to skip the afternoon altogether and just get to the evening.

“I see.” Hikaru cocks his head, his half ponytail brushing his shoulders as he scoots closer to the other man. “How is he holding up?”

“He’s coping. Somehow.”

“And does he *know?”*

The question makes him shudder.

“No,” he whispers. He never told his boyfriend about the dreams, because he won’t do anything drastic and there is no point in making him worry. In a way, he doesn’t want to tell him. This kind of misery is private; it’s horrifying. But it doesn’t take anything away from his feelings for Chuuya.
Even with fresh scars under his bandages, prickling and rubbing against the gauze, Dazai loves him. He loves him more than life, more than light. “No, I didn’t tell him.”

“That’s smart,“ Hikaru agrees. He takes a drag, lips lingering over the stub.“I have some meth — got it through friends of friends, down at the docks. They say it’s good.”

Dazai scrunches his nose. “Not my thing,” he says, although he supposes that the judgment may sound hypocritical coming from him.

He never cared much about what people did to themselves – their sins and mistakes, the lies they vomit out in the dark, the way they slip. Salvation is a privilege. He was never about the ‘my body is a temple’ shit and all that.

And *yet.*

“Are you sure? I’d be happy to share it.”

“Very sure. You shouldn’t get involved in that shit, either.”

Hikaru’s eyes narrow. They turn lightless. “Are you a preacher all of a

sudden?"

"I'm just saying drugs mess you up," he says. Not that it truly matters when they are messed up already. He puffs out some smoke.

What's one more sin, anyway? One more check added to the list of reasons why they won't make it to heaven.

"Do you think we can steal some alcohol instead?" Hikaru asks, eyes lost in the nothingness. "I want to do something dumb. Today is boring."

"Then find something to do on your own," he answers. "I am with Chuuya tonight. I told you."

"You're always with Chuuya."

Dazai scoffs. He is not sure what rubs him the wrong way: the indirect judgment or the supposition that he is not fun to be with anymore. As if he's being accused of not being capable of acting as a good friend and a decent boyfriend in the same heartbeat.

He blinks, and he breathes in a mouthful of smoke and he's not sure how he got this low all of a sudden. He's *crashing.* It sucks.

"I'm going to stop," he declares after a moment of silence.

Hikaru quirks an eyebrow. He knows exactly what Dazai means. "You sure you can just stop? It'll be painful."

"I've stopped once. I don't see why I can't do it again. I've thrown out that shit already."

"Ah. You could have given it to me."

The idea makes him scowl. "I'm not going to give you razors, Hikaru."

"Why not? What a waste." A puff of smoke. "So you're stopping again, huh? Cool. I hope it doesn't hurt too much, I really do."

It will hurt, Dazai thinks. He never deluded himself it was going to be an easy process. It's difficult, and it's scary, and it hurts. It hurts all the time. He feels empty and then he overflows, but the scars under the bandages remind him he can bleed.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

But, as his lips wrap around the stub, Dazai nods to himself and makes up his mind.

“I don’t want to hurt the people I care about.”

“Enter Chuuya again. Don’t you have a personality left, ‘Samu?”

“Maybe I just don’t want my death to be something as stupid as bleeding out in a bathroom,” he snaps back, eyes darkening as he realizes that he’s been lured into a trap that he didn’t see coming. He showed emotion. Hikaru made him tick, and few people other than him and Fyodor can boast the same ability — and so his smile relaxes, and his shoulders sag, and he *breathes*. “Ah, you’ve got me. You’re pissing me off. Good job.“

Hikaru can shake him awake from this numbing sense of euthanized reality. His presence rattles him. His abrasive words and cruel acts snap Dazai into a sense of alertness; of control.
Pain makes Dazai alive. He hates pain. And he hates that he needs pain.

“Nice.” Hikaru’s lips curl up — a sunshine smile. “You are welcome, by the way. I’m glad you feel something."

“Don’t you?”

“You know I don’t.” When Hikaru shakes his head, it’s defeated. “Stop with the dreams, if you want to. No one is forcing you.”

You trigger me all the time, Dazai would like to counter. *You dare me to go back.*

But that would be unjust, when he is the one who took on the bet, welcoming the distraction as it saved his life and damned his soul. He relapsed because maybe — just *maybe* — he needed it all long.

Dazai’s fingers shake as he grips the cigarette. His hands ache. It’s hard to muster control when shame and sorrow dance hand in hand.

“—But would stopping help you for real?” Hikaru carries on, staring at the middle distance. “Is it what you want or is it what your friends want? All I did was give you a choice. You chose. To me, it feels quite sad that you have to go back on something that you chose willingly because you’re worried about someone else.”

“I really don’t want to worry my friends. Odasaku would be

disappointed.”

“But what about your needs?”

“You don’t understand.”

Hikaru’s bottom lip juts out. He doesn’t like it, the passive-aggressiveness seeping through his silence, yet he doesn’t fight him. He shrugs and tuts, and allows the matter to dissolve into a stretched moment of silence.

Time slows down in the afternoon's quietude.

They both smoke without talking, acutely aware of each other’s presence.

When Hikaru exhales a deep, tired sigh before tossing the cigarette to the ground and stepping on it, it feels like they have been in silence for a lifetime.

“There has been another suicide at the aqueduct. It looked beautiful.” He turns to Dazai. “I’m going to see it now. I’ll send you pictures.”

“I don’t want them.”

“Then delete them,” Hikaru says, an excited ring in his voice. “I can’t wait to be there.”

—

Later that night, Chuuya is standing on the stage of the Old World, eyes closed, singing for a bar thronged with people. He kneels, he gets closer to the audience.

From his stool at the counter, hanging about away from the crowd, Dazai takes in the sight.
He drinks it in with a smile so wide his cheeks hurt.

Chuuya’s voice drips down his spine like warm honey.

He’s a dream — a sweet one, and a *wet* one. His lips brush the microphone as he curls over the words. And he handles the microphone like a lover, fingers shrouded in fishnet gloves firmly wrapped around the black plastic. The red lights of the venue cast an unreal light over his face.
He’s beautiful, and Dazai could *swoon.* Because Chuuya’s voice is thick and enveloping, and he has this way of singing like he’s punching the

air out of him.
Like he's *fucking.*

Every note vibrates with an all-consuming intimacy. Like a flame, he eats up the oxygen in the room. A candle; crackling.

The performance is even more powerful as Chuuya remains face-level with the audience, singing with gritty voice and gravelly murmurs.

The way he purrs the words makes the love ballad sound like a pillow talk between long-lost lovers who have finally found each other again.

On the other side of the stage, Albatross pinches the cords of his bass – and he should be singing too, but Chuuya seized the stage and made him his.

He's holding the crowd for ransom.

No one is breathing, almost, as his voice fills the bar.

"So no troubles in heaven, I take it?"

Dazai almost *screams.*

The reaction clearly pleases Lippmann, because the man snickers and elbows him in the ribs. Dazai can only hear him because they are almost at the same height, standing arm against arm against the counter. His heart slows down, returning aware of his surroundings as the spell of Chuuya's voice slowly releases him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's been a tough year."

Damn, difficult is an understatement. Still hesitant, Dazai nods. "Yeah. It sure has been."

"But Chuuya says you guys are doing good." Lippmann offers him a grin, and it's blue and green and red with the changing lights of the bar. Chuuya's voice vibrates with the bass. "We're trying to help too, you know. Obviously. But he says you're never leaving him alone — that you're in his corner."

"Chuuya is too short to be left alone. What if he can't reach the top shelves?"

The grin Lippmann gives him is wary. “Thank you for not running away.”

“I had no intention to,” he says. He *means* every word ferociously.

Lippmann tuts, head dipping in approval.

“It’s good to hear. We’re all reassured, especially after the way things started out with Mitsuru.”

“Micchan, Chuuya and I are fine,” he gives in, shrugging away the memory of how he and Mitsuru behaved like perfect imbeciles. How they messed up. How Chuuya almost stormed out on them, how he almost jeopardized the only love he never knew.

He focuses on the stage instead — on his boyfriend, with his brick-red lipstick and smudged mascara and hat slightly tipped to the side. He’s wearing leather and high heels, and Dazai will be damned if he won’t make good use of them once they are home. He sees what Lippmann means, with Chuuya singing as if he’s begging someone – anyone; *him* – to drag him off stage and whisk him away. Save him, maybe.

And, Christ, Dazai would love to steal the redhead away for himself. Ice Man and Albatross would then murder him for running away with their best friend, but it would be worth it. The honorable death of a brave, love-blinded soldier.

That’s just what Chuuya does to him.

He glows. He’s a born performer, and artist, a vision — and he is art, and he’s Dazai’s *heart*. He drawls out the sultry words of a love song and Dazai’s stomach tangles.

Lippmann tilts his head toward the stage. “Thanks, Dazai.”

“What for?”

“For this. Chuuya deserves to be happy.” He offers him a smile that seems sheepish, but then he winks and it feels like a blessing – like an initiation as he is finally welcomed in the Flags. “We might have misjudged you at first. You’re a cool one.”

“I’m not sure Ice Man agrees.”

“There’s a reason for his name, y’know.”

“He lives in a freezer?”

“He takes time to warm up to people.” Lippmann’s grin shines. “I suppose it means you are officially part of the Flags now. We are a family, and we look out for each other.”

“So Chuuya tells me,” he says. It doesn’t matter if Lippmann heard him or not.

“By the way, your friend is here to see you — said he won’t step in, but that you knew he was coming.”

Computing the words while still tongue-tied by the unexpected kindness, Dazai’s gaze jumps from Lippmann’s face to the stage. “Odasaku is here?”

“Hikaru,” Lippmann corrects him, eyebrows crumpling up in a slight frown.

Weird.
He thought he made it clear to Hikaru that he would not be available – considering that Mitsuru, Albatross and Fyodor vetoed having him around, he has given up trying to merge the groups. ‘ *That boy hates us all,’* Mitsuru told him.

Despite his love for Hikaru, that rotten loyalty born from a shared trauma, Dazai can’t blame their reaction. They keep cutting themselves on the edges of Hikaru’s broken personality.

Chuuya understands. After Dazai told him things about his years in the Kokiden Foundation — secrets shared in the sanctity of their bed, with hands looking for each other and legs tangled — Chuuya has been supportive. That makes Dazai’s heart sing, but he won’t impose Hikaru on Mitsuru and the others. It’s not fair.

Hesitantly, he steps away from Lippmann. “If Chuuya finishes the gig before I’m back…”

Lippmann grins.

“I’ll tell him where to find you,” he promises. When they share a smile, reassurance pools in Dazai’s guts. It’s warm and thick, like heating jelly, like spring rolling in after a long winter.

Maybe Lippmann is right, and he’s finally building something good for himself.

As he makes his way to the door, he resolves he will check on Hikaru quickly and he'll go back to Chuuya.

Music echoes in his ears as he walks to the exit, shouldering his way past a group of chatty college students giggling by the front door. They laugh without sound, looking like a muted movie as the music swallows their words. Stubs and cigarettes proper the pavement immediately outside the Old World, right where the bar opens into a secluded alleyway bathed in the sweet fragrance of vapes and alcohol.

Two girls outside are fawning over the short redhead singer. Dazai smirks to himself.

That's my best friend, he thinks. That's my boyfriend.
It's warm, reassuring.

But when he sees Hikaru waiting for him outside the venue, slipping his phone into his pocket the second he clocks Dazai's presence, a sense of curiosity takes over him.
Hikaru did send him pictures from the aqueduct. He ignored them all, eliminating the emails one by one without opening them.

Hikaru's eyes twinkle. "Hi," he says and steps forward. "The suicide was beautiful. I missed you there."

"I told you I was with Chuuya."

"Right, yes. I know you were busy, but I had to see you."

"Is everything okay?"

"Not quite," the boy says, in a breezy voice that causes Dazai to stop. This is not good.

"What happened?"

"I avenged you." His melodious voice cracks just so. He sounds like he hasn't slept in ages, high on adrenaline. "I was bored after being at the suicide site. Then I came back to your class, and I heard some gossip about a certain Fujiwara guy and his group speaking ill of you — was he with Chuuya's sister? I heard he was mean. He was jealous because you dated her. *Why* did you date her?"

Schooling his face to betray no emotion, Dazai bounces on the balls of his feet. "Hikaru," he asks, trying to sound reasonable, "why are you in my university, asking about me, when I'm not there?"

“Oh, is it bad? I’m just curious.”

“I mean, it’s not bad, but—“

But it’s starting to creep him out. Not that Hikaru notices, of course.

“I just don’t understand. Why were you dating Chuuya’s sister? Did you like her?” He insists, with a veiled innocence that makes Dazai frown.

“I told you she’s a friend, and I was helping her. As it turns out, it wasn’t worth our time.”

“Those boys hate you.”

“People like Fujiwara are just born resentful.”

“But they weren’t nice to you - Fujiwara and his friend Riichi, I mean. I heard of them.”

Hikaru’s eyes narrow as he religiously allows Dazai some time to digest the situation, and consider the ramifications of what he’s saying.
The curve of his smile doesn’t change as Dazai’s eyebrows draw closer and closer to the center of his face with every new sentence.

He can’t believe Riichi is still at it.

He can understand Fujiwara acting butthurt over what happened with Mitsuru — as if he wasn’t the one who threw her away — but Riichi? God. Yes, Dazai fucked his girlfriend. Sue him. Yes, it’s about time everybody moved on — the ex-girlfriend certainly did.
Voices in the corridors whisper that she’s doing well for herself. Her vitality shines through, now. They say she experiments, she dresses up, she laughs without feeling judged. She got rid of her asshat boyfriend, and good for her.

They went about it the wrong way, sure. Dazai slept around as his life depended on it, but people like Riichi always made him look like the good guy.

“Hikaru, this is not…”

“This guy, Riichi. He’ll find his car keyed tomorrow morning when he wakes up. And Fujiwara— he was mean to you and your friends.”
Hikaru’s eyes roam across his face, the eerie edge in his voice forcing

Dazai to stay vigilant. “It would be a pity if he were to be kicked out of all the sports clubs on drug allegations. Meth, too — an ugly matter. No club will accept him, now.”

Dazai’s blood runs cold.

Fujiwara’s entire future was based on his sports career. Mitsuru told him that. Pulling a couple of strings would have been easy.

Dazai could have ruined Fujiwara’s life if he wanted, but he didn’t. He *chose* not to. Mitsuru asked him and Odasaku to let go of the matter, but Hikaru never understood trust.

He lives in absolutes, and his wrath befalls like the one of God upon his enemies. Or *Dazai’s* enemies.

“It wasn’t necessary,” he says.

“It was. What happened to you? You were respected. ‘The worst misfortune of Dazai’s enemies is being Dazai’s enemies,’ they said. You defended me all the time.”

“I’m not like that anymore.”

“Why?”

His shoulders drop. *Right. Why did he change, again?* “Because the real world doesn’t work like that place.”

“They called you a slut, ‘Samu. And you didn’t take revenge, so I had to do something. They were mean.” His lips crumple up. “They hurt you, so I hurt them.”

Irritation bolts down his body. It’s searing cold. “You should have come to me first.”

“How *could* I? You’ve changed too much. You look out for your Chuuya, but who looks out for you?”

When Dazai sighs, his shoulders sag under the weight of the conversation. It feels like running in circles, like being trapped in a maze. Like he’s underwater and he’s trying to reach the surface while someone drags him to the bottom.

It’s wearing him out.

Chuuya is looking out for him — he did so with Riichi, the night of

Fujiwara's party. Damn, he punched Riichi in the face.
But it's a normal way of being there for one another. Chuuya's support is made of words, of touches, of falling asleep in one another's arms knowing they are safe.

But whatever he will do, it can't match the visceral passion of Hikaru's zealotry.

"Why, Hikaru?" His half-lidded gaze lands on the boy, and he sees the darkness he escaped. "Why did you do it?"

"Because I am in love with you."

Dazai's eyes widen so suddenly that he is sure they will roll out of his skull.

That's not what he expected to hear after this premise, yet it doesn't surprise him at all.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs after a moment. Fuck, he thinks, how is he going to explain this to Chuuya? This timing is a joke. He *can't* upset Chuuya. "That's not something I can return."

"I don't care." Tossing a glance at the Old World's neon sign, gleaming behind Dazai's shoulder and bathing the alleyway in warm golden light, Hikaru clenches his fist. "I've never dreamed you would return my feelings — that's what makes them dear to me. I'm not asking you to love me back, but just hear me out."

Defeated, he nods. "…Alright."

"I've loved you forever. But you got out and I'm here on my own, and it's lonely and I don't like it. I don't like it one bit." Hikaru exhales, taking a step forward before Dazai can interrupt him. "I miss my friend, 'Samu."

"I am *here."*

Hikaru shakes his head. "You are in the light, and this darkness hurts."

With a thousand pretty words burning in his throat, words *Odasaku* would say, Dazai admits to himself that he's tired of leaving friends behind. Then, he swallows that admission. It festers in his stomach. He's tired of drowning in regrets for the people he could not save, the ones he could not take with himself.

“Why are you telling me all this? You've waited so long, why *now?"*

“My parents." It's a murmur so feeble, so *lost,* that it tells him Hikaru is already dead. A part of him is, at least. Maybe, a part of him died with every suicide he saw, with every time he searched for salvation and found nothing. “They think I should go back.”

Dazai’s blood runs cold.
He hates the voice that tells him that tossing the boy in a rehab center and throwing away the key makes sense after what Hikaru just said about Riichi and Fujiwara. He needs help. Impressive how easy it is to shove people back into an asylum once you’re out. But Hikaru is not the only one relapsing.

“We can help you, all of us. I can talk to your parents. Odasaku has the contact of a therapist, he—”

“You can’t talk to my parents,” Hikaru interrupts him. “They won’t listen. They just want to get rid of me.”

“Kokiden Foundation is not the only structure in Japan.”

“They want me there, ‘Samu. They hate me.”

“I’m sure they only want to help.”

“You know that going back would kill me,” Hikaru insists, urgency dripping from his voice, the tremor of his entire body so subtle that Dazai almost misses it. “If I went back in there, would you come with me?”

The possibility makes the hairs stand on the back of his neck. A hole opens in his abdomen, sudden and painful enough that he has to stop himself from doubling up. They opened him up and found his interiors unsightly, his insides stuck together with black tar; he was ruined to the core. Unsalvageable. What if he goes back, and they open him again and find the same?

What if all the pills he swallowed had been for nothing?

What if he’s still broken?

“I’d rather die,” he says.

Keeping his voice in check is an exercise in discipline that burns him from within, and a flash of disappointment crosses Hikaru’s eyes. “So

what if we *do* die?"

Goosebumps bloom under his bandages. "You're not serious."

"I'm serious. The river seems good enough to me."

"Look, if you'd just let me help…"

"But 'Samu, I don't want help." Hikaru addresses him with a light smile. "I never did. I want *you*— all of you. And I know your Slug loves you, and that's okay because he can have your remnants. He can have your life. All I ask you is to be mine, truly mine, once." He looks at him, and Dazai's stomach drops to his calves. "I want you to be my first and last time, and that's the only condition I will accept to go back to Kokiden Foundation. Give me the chance you promised me. That's my request."

—

Chuuya is sitting on Dazai's bed, fantasizing about punching Hikaru in the face.

"Hikaru asked me to be his first time," Dazai told him, hands trembling as if he was terrified of the reaction, *"He also made a mess of Fujiwara's life but— you had to know. I'll cut ties. I am fine with not talking to him anymore."*

The fucking audacity. He should want to murder him.
He should want to march to the boy and pin him to a wall by the balls, and tell him to keep his filthy paws off his boyfriend.

'Should' being the keyword, of course.

The thing is, he is not sure about what he wants to do right now. Anger thickens the blood in his veins, unchecked, and part of him wants to go on a rampage and do all the above and much worse.

Yet he is also not sure it'd change anything. A restless sense of immobility takes over him, and he looks down to the floor and runs away from the situation without moving at all. He retreats behind a wall of silence that has become familiar in the last months.

He picks at his fingers as he thinks over it. When Dazai moves closer to wrap a hand over his bitten cuticles, he shrugs the touch away.

"Chuuya," Dazai says. *Begs.* "Say something."

”I’m fucking speechless.”

”You are not. I can hear all the comments you’re swallowing.”

Ah, Dazai sure knows him too well. How annoying. “I guess I’m just blindsided by this whole thing,” he admits, cautious not to cross the line between understanding and judgment. “Hikaru cares for you. I thought he was your friend.”

Hikaru was — seemed, at least — a kind person.
Maybe Chuuya was just too caught up in his own thing to notice. And maybe it’s *stupid* but, despite everything, Chuuya remains convinced that the younger boy could still be saved. He’s not a bad person to the core, no matter what Mitsuru and Fedya say — no matter how he could recognize Hikaru flirting with his boyfriend. He trusts Dazai enough not to worry about it, but that doesn’t mean he’s blind.

“Do you think he’ll hurt himself?” He asks, instead. Dazai shakes his head.

“I guess. I wouldn’t say it’s impossible.”

“If you think he could hurt himself, you should stop him and call his parents,” he says. “He’s an asshole, but you have a right to be worried.”

Dazai shakes his head as if to shrug the comment off his shoulders, running a hand through his hair. “Frankly, Chuuya? I am not sure about what I should do. I tried his parents but they are ignoring my calls, so I don’t know what to do with him. Becoming someone’s sex toy aside, because that’s obviously not going to happen.”

With a joyless smirk, Chuuya pulls his legs on the bed and folds them under his body. “Thanks for clarifying it.”

“You knew I wasn’t going to.”

“I—” Voice trailing off, he looks for Dazai’s face. He rakes a hand through his hair, wondering if a more balanced person would react differently; someone who hasn’t lost his father and moral compass just recently, perhaps. And he can’t but wonder if the timing was deliberate. “I don’t know what to say, Dazai.”

Dazai throws him a sharp smirk, but his eyes are dark. His summer smile is gone, and Chuuya hates it.

“Oh, so now I’m Dazai?”

“You’re a stinky Mackerel,” Chuuya corrects himself. “Seriously, ‘Samu. He is your friend. I want to punch him, but I have no right to tell you what to do.”

“He’s not a friend right now.”

“I suppose he isn’t, no.”

“But I do feel responsible,” Dazai whispers, padding closer to the bed. For a second, he looks pained. “I can’t be responsible for—“

“You’re not responsible for shit, don’t even think that. Don’t. It’s not *your* fault. It’s not fair.”

“Yet it’s what’s happening,” Dazai counters, with a hard edge in his voice.

The instability of Hikaru’s mental health is the reason Dazai admitted he didn’t answer with an outright *'no'*. He’s buying time. Chuuya agrees. It’s hard, it sucks, but he agrees; the last thing Dazai needs is the burden of someone else’s suicide.

“I’m sorry I can’t help you more,” Chuuya murmurs. His shoulders shake as he clenches his fists, unable to act; unable to punch the wall and scream into a pillow and strangle Hikaru. Unable to do anything but look at Dazai in a way that reminds him that he’s worth looking at. That he’s being seen, and he’s not at fault. He reaches out with his gaze and his touches, and makes sure Dazai knows he’s not alone.

“I don’t think there’s much we can do.”

“I wish I could solve this for you.”

“It’s okay. I’ve informed Odasaku and the faculty about Fujiwara, and this is the kind of absurd request I will share straight away with my boyfriend.”

“And I’m glad you did,” Chuuya agrees. “Speaking about other people and sharing, I have something— I meant to tell you when I was told about Paris, but then, y’know. And I know it’s been months, but there hasn’t been a right time, and I couldn’t find a way to introduce the matter. So—”

Here goes nothing, he thinks.

Little does he know that Dazai is thinking the exact same thing.

Here it goes, Dazai thinks.

He's been waiting for it since the moment Fyodor tumbled back into their lives. Hikaru's message about Fyodor and Chuuya flashes in front of his eyes.
He's prepared, or so he hopes.

"—So. I slept with Fyodor. A million years ago, and I meant to tell you sooner but I couldn't even think about dealing with it."

Although he expected it, Dazai pauses to gauge the information. Chuuya's posture betrays just the amount of discomfort of someone disclosing an annoying page in his past. A closed chapter.

It's not a confession, it's a statement.

Dazai's eyes widen — then, they narrow as the certainty of something he already deduced settles inside him. "I had a hunch, yes."

"It was a party, we were both drinking. You weren't in my life anymore, but you are *now*— so I need you to understand that it didn't mean shit."

"You mentioned seeing Fyodor in New York," he echoes.

"Yeah. And I should have told you sooner since we both know Fyodor, but I was afraid it would give it too much importance." Chuuya's shoulders fall, red strands falling over his forehead. "I didn't have the strength for another drama. I know it's not an excuse."

"So you think it didn't mean anything?"

"I *know* it didn't."

"Ah," he says, because it's fine if Chuuya doesn't want to discuss the situation or tackle the problem. It's okay to stash the ugly and the drab under the rug. But *this* is plain bullshit. "Really, Chuuya?" His cadence comes out sickly sweet, but his smile looks barren. A nuclear-wasteland level of bleakness. "I get what you're saying, and it's fair enough. But do you *really* believe it meant nothing to both of you? Because Dostoyevsky said that he was leaving you to my care like he was stepping aside to make things easy for me. For us." He inches

forward, caging Chuuya into the bed and between his stretched arms. “He said he was *leaving* you to me.”

“What?!”

“Are you really that surprised?” As Chuuya tries to stand up, Dazai pushes him back into the bed — luring a knee between his parted legs and pinning him in place. “No, let’s talk.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“Fyodor liked you. Don’t insult yourself and me by pretending we didn’t both notice it.”

“Dazai…”

“Dazai?” He taunts.

Chuuya rolls his eyes.

“Osamu,” he corrects himself. “Mackerel. Bane of my existence, my soulmate and source of my headaches. You can’t be jealous, for fuck’s sake; not of Fyodor, of all people. I didn’t tell you only because I was worried that you’d freak out.”

He knows: he knows Chuuya’s heart better than his own, and he doesn’t doubt the redhead for a moment.
Captured by the raw emotion in his blue eyes, though, Dazai wets his lips. Hunger awakens in his belly. “A filthy rat touched you.”

“It was nothing. I don’t like Fyodor that way, you know I don’t.”

He nods. “Yes, I know.”

“It only happened once years ago.”

“He likes you.”

“And I only like *you.”*

Dazai’s breath catches. “I like you too,” he echoes, and every time he hears it, it blindsides him like the very first time. Every time Chuuya says something as innocent as ‘I like you,’ Dazai returns a teenager all over again.

“But I feared you would— I don’t know. Leave me.”

“Don’t be silly,” he cuts him off, noticing the flustered heat surging from Chuuya’s cheeks. “And you don’t have to explain. I know you more than enough to understand why you didn’t tell me.”

“Then…”

The mattress cracks as he pushes closer into Chuuya’s space, closing in until the redhead is lying fully on the bed, only propped up on his elbows. His breath stutters when Dazai hovers over him, locked into a quivering tension. “But, you see, the fact that I guessed it on my own doesn’t mean that I’m happy about it,” he clarifies, the hollow sweetness of his words dripping with desire. “In fact, I’m quite annoyed.”

Instantly, shuddering under him, Chuuya’s lips curl up into a grin. “What do you want?”

“I wonder if Chuuya can guess it,” he croons, the hollow tone of his voice catching fire. Tension builds up between them until Dazai can barely breathe at all, lost in the other's promises of reassurance.

"I think I have a hunch, yes."

“I just wish you would have told me,” he caves in, though, studying Chuuya’s expression from above.

“I know, I’m sorry. It didn’t matter before, and then we got together and Paris happened and I kept thinking of how to tell you.”

“I can’t read your mind,” Dazai murmurs.

“No, I know. I *know*. But then everything went to shit.”

“You were about to go to Paris with him, Chuuya.”

“He is only a friend I fucked once.” Lifting a hand, Chuuya cups his cheek. His fingers skim Dazai’s cheekbone, his chin, his nose, and tug a curl behind his ear with delicate tenderness. “Before you say anything, you were never just a friend. You were always my person. It’s not the same, not even close.”

That makes Dazai halt. His lips part as he exhales a “right” under his breath.

"I have my hands full with just one Mackerel. That's more than enough."

"Right."

Chuuya's eyes turn dim, the cornflower blue clouded as he searches for something on Dazai's face. "But I didn't consider your feelings properly, 'Samu, and I'm sorry."

When the redhead interlaces their fingers together, lifting their hands to kiss Dazai's knuckles, a stronger jolt of desire rushes down his spine.

In the depths of his boyfriend's irises, he's confronted with the secrets *he* is keeping.

But then Chuuya beams and it's a challenge and a promise at the same time. "What about I remind you of exactly how much I like you?"

Just because I pissed you off, he means. It's an apology that Dazai can get behind. He pulls away just enough to reach for the teddy bear that has taken ownership of his bed. Samu relocated to Yokohama with them, and it was moved to Dazai's bedroom after a much-needed pit stop at the dry cleaner.

"Hold on to the teddy bear, and don't make a sound," he instructs, handing Chuuya the toy.

"What? Not *Samu!"*

His lips twitch up. "Samu won't mind some action."

"You're a pervert!"

"You're welcome to ignore it if you want the entire building to hear you scream my name."

"Ain't you sure of yourself? What makes you think you're that good?" He scoffs, though, his body naturally leaning closer to Dazai's. "At least take off the bandages; they itch."

"The bandages stay on," he replies. His mind flickers to the fresh cuts peppering his arms and legs, frantically crafting an excuse for the wounds. The answer is too quick, and Chuuya's face darkens with an unspoken question before Dazai dips to kiss his forehead. "You've been a disobedient dog, Chibi. Deal with the consequences."

"I'm not a dog," he growls, pushing back into the bed and holding onto the teddy bear. Still, he fastens his legs around Dazai's middle.

“But that’s fine. I’ll let you have things your way, just this time.”

“Sure, just *this* time~” Dazai sing-songs.

They both know it’s not that easy. Dazai can make people dance on the palm of his hand and sing birds out of trees, but he can’t command Chuuya around just as seamlessly.
The redhead makes it very clear that everything Dazai gets is hard-earned and willingly given.

So, if Chuuya rolls his eyes to the ceiling but still allows Dazai to climb more comfortably on top of him, it’s because he truly, *utterly* wants it.

“Gosh,” Chuuya says, voice muffled by the teddy bear, “You’re insufferable.”

Humming, Dazai lowers to kiss his throat. And his chin. And his nose.

He’ll kiss and pamper every inch of him, erasing any long-standing trace of Dostoyevsky’s fingertips and wiping away anyone who touched Chuuya.

This skin, this body, Chuuya's tiny tattoo of Baki hidden behind his ear and his caresses and his kisses — they belong to him.

“I just don’t like it,” he mulls under his breath, almost to himself. “I hate it when I remember other people have touched my best friend.” His hand slips under Chuuya’s shirt, palming his flat stomach. “My Chuuya.”

“Possessive jerk.”

“But you love me~”

Ah, he thinks. *Chuuya’s eyes put the stars to shame.* “Yeah. I do love you.”

That day, they take it slow. They make it sweet. When Chuuya finally sobs his name, the teddy bear discarded so he can claw at the brunet’s shoulders under the torture of teasing, dragged-out thrusts, Dazai glances up.
He inspects the scene, drinking every detail. His best friend. His person.

His.

Mouth filled with Chuuya's skin, nostrils flaring with the scent of lube and sex, he smiles.

What a beautiful view, he thinks.

He never wants to stop getting high on this feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you liked the chapter, SKK just trust each other a lot 🥺
And! They are both on a healing journey, they are doing their best
(Next chapter more will happen and Chuuya is going to confront Hikaru and OH BOY)

Chapter 13: Blood and all

Chapter Summary

A party, a discovery, a fight and a ruined friendship. Not necessarily in this order.

The hatred in Chuuya's eyes, entirely black in the night, tells Hikaru that the redhead could murder him twice. One for Dazai, and one for himself.

Chapter Notes

TWs, as always:
- self-harm
- grief
- mention of dealing/consuming drugs
- gaslighting

There is a whole discussion on self-harm so PLEASE be very, very careful. It's not violent/gruesome but just know it's there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking up at five in the morning is far from the beginning of the perfect day if you ask Chuuya. Even less, a perfect *date*.

But he has some quality shopping to do and a shooting at the Shibuya Scramble in four hours (theme: *urban jungle*. Like it's *2008*. To say that he craves the sweet release of retirement before reaching 30 is an understatement) and the fish for dinner doesn't just show up at his door.
Unless that fish is Dazai, who has a talent for magicking himself wherever Chuuya is.

That is what lured them to the pulsating heart of Tokyo's overcrowded fish market: shopping for dinner. With the idea, possibly, to get in and out before the flocks of sushi-craving, seafood-hunting tourists assault the place.

The plan so far had varying stages of success: dressing in a relatively comfortable way for the shoot (something that won't cause Fyodor to send him home to change, because the designer is *very* partial about animal prints and Chuuya loves them); kicking Dazai out of the bed (he asked); hopping on the JR-East train (empty, a small victory) to

the Fish Market.

Despite the early hour, a busy universe bustling with scents unfolds in the narrow alleys just past the market's gates, embracing tiny restaurants and busy shops beneath a gauzy veil of pale light. Someone screams about ramen's broth, and a man laughs as an old saleswoman hands him a free sample of something that looks like a steamy dumpling.
The stalls of vendors are stirred to life. The air, saturated with the essence of the sea, envelops the senses — but Chuuya has a mission and no time to lose.

"Chuuya, slow down~"

"Come on, Mackerel." He tugs onto Dazai's hand, the early sun peeking out of the slanted tips of the rooftops and skyscrapers in the east brightening his smile. "You were the one who wanted to tag along and make it a date. Now move."

"In my defense, I missed the 'wake up at 5 am' part."

"I told you *twice* if you were sure 'bout it. You said love would give you the power to wake up at any time you wanted."

A heartbeat of hesitation. Then, Dazai yawns. "I might have overestimated the power of two Monsters and a coffee," he declares.

"Oh?" Chuuya grins. "What about the power of love, Mr. *I am always right*?"

"Last I checked, that doesn't come with caffeine."

"So, you *were* talking shit."

It's somewhat triumphant, because he lives for the good-natured banter. It's waking up Chuuya, too. "…Chuuya's disgracefully mean, for someone so short."

As he says that, Dazai is too preoccupied with pouting to notice that a tall, western man wearing a huge backpack is about to shoulder him while walking in the opposite direction. Chuuya tugs him to the side just in time, pressing them both against a ragged wall. The proximity makes his heart stutter.
Some tourists point at Chuuya — at his leopard-print t-shirt and skin-tight, tempting black jeans and combat boots. They stare at his lip gloss. He can distinguish some words and not others, and not all are

nice — 'exotic,' 'idol' and 'that's so crazy' blend in the mouths of the people assuming that he's not spent most of his life abroad (they are *wrong)*.
They think he can't understand them and, at the end of the day, they don't care about his feelings as they point at him like an animal at the zoo.

It's incredible how tourists expect everyone to speak perfect English, but equally assume that no one understands it when they are spewing comments.

"Dazai, I swear to God," he growls, thrown off by the people pointing at them, even though he can't pinpoint *why* it's affecting him. "You can't slow down every three steps."

"But I didn't expect so many peopleee~"

"Then you could have stayed home."

"But I didn't want to wake up without Chuuya," Dazai murmurs, in that half-joking tone that sends a shiver all the way to his tailbone. They live together, and yet they miss each other all the time. It makes him beam, suddenly grateful for the violet sky and the early morning and for their newfound domesticity. Their love tastes like possibilities.

The tenderness in Dazai, how he skims his thumb over the back of his hand, soothes away some of Chuuya's nervousness. His tension thaws under the touches.

"Oh, did you?" He teases.

"I did. But I don't know if it's been a good idea." Dazai glances around, sidestepping a laughing group of young European tourists who look like they never went to sleep in the first place. They reek of smoke and are wearing sunglasses and cumbersome-looking backpacks. "This place is too busy for seven in the morning."

"Generally I'd agree, but there's a shop owner I know in this area. He has the best swordfish ever."

"Still not worth the trouble."

"My *special* fish cakes deserve the best fish in town," Chuuya says as if he *believes* that something as mundane as food justifies going through the trouble of waking at an ungodly hour of the morning. He says it as

if he doesn't regret it at least a little — which, for the record, is a lie. He damns himself every time but, in the end, it's always worth it. "If you're a good boy, I'll even buy you some premium crab and make some crab cakes for your bento."

Dazai's face lightens up. "Crab?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

Now, Chuuya is a man of his word.

He *will* cook Dazai crab, and korokke, and lasagne, and casserole, especially because he impulse-bought about half a dozen recipe books to keep his head occupied and his hands full of *something* after the issues with Hikaru and Fyodor.
Every day, he's still trying to ignore the voice reminding him of his dad. He is in dire need of a time-out, and wandering through the shops calms him.

He comes to a stop before a vibrant seafood display, lifting an eyebrow at the array of fish showcased on ice. *Obviously,* Dazai misses it as he is eyeing the nearby stalls and shops, but the pungent smell lures Chuuya closer to the stall.

It smells *authentic.*

Which is not always pleasant when shopping for fish ingredients, but he's ready to sacrifice his sense of smell for a good dinner.
An elderly woman with gnarled hands beckons him closer with a knowing smile. When he asks her about the crab — it's red and vibrant and it *does* look above average — her wrinkled smirk curls and she extends a tiny plastic cup in his direction. "Try it for yourself," she says.

Respectfully, Chuuya bows his head and accepts the sample with both hands. If the woman notices his bright neon pink nail polish, she doesn't comment.

"Oi, Dazai," he calls, tapping his bottom lip as he studies the white meat; plump, mouthwateringly inviting. "Come here. I need you to try something for me."

He doesn't have to ask twice and, as Dazai approaches him, he takes the chance to take a good look at his boyfriend.

The speckles of gold in his irises, his long limbs covered in bandages;

the inner *delicacy* of his beauty, honed features softened by fluffy curls. Chuuya doesn't fear the old scars he has seen underneath the bandages, but he *does* fear the monsters in Dazai's head. He's terrified they'll steal Dazai away.

But then Dazai sees the sample of crab paste that Chuuya is holding, and he *beams,* and the redhead's pulse slows down.

He has a glorious smile, Dazai, one Chuuya has loved for as long as he can remember. He doesn't want to lose it ever again.

When the other is close enough, Chuuya lifts the bite of thick crab paste towards Dazai's mouth. With his free hand, he gently rubs his thumb over the center of his boyfriend's hand to prompt him to open up his mouth. "Come on now, say *ahhh*," he says, voice dripping with irony and fingers hovering just a few inches from Dazai's lips.

Dazai stares.

"Is Chuuya hand-feeding me?" He asks, big eyes blinking as he looks at Chuuya's hand.

"Huh, yes?"

"Scandalous. Lewd. What will people say?"

"That I am gonna fucking try this myself if you don't shut up."

That's convincing enough. Dazai obeys, keeping a strand of hair safely behind his left ear as he curls over Chuuya's fingers. He purses his lips, his mouth warm and shy as he envelops the redhead's fingers to nibble the bite-sized piece of crab.

Dazai's tongue is wet against the pads of his fingers, gentle teeth scraping the skin just so.

That's not fair, he thinks, a quivering want swelling in him. *Remember you're in public, Nakahara.*

What he has no intention of admitting, though, is that he could get used to hand-feeding Dazai fresh crab meat; he could get used to feeding him anything.

As long as Dazai keeps smiling like that — like summertime and bird songs and flower fields — he's happy to feed him.

Entertaining that silly thought — although he is *seriously* considering

it — Chuuya lets out a low hum as he waits for the response. He observes patiently as Dazai swallows.
Warmth jolts down his spine, grateful for the privilege of seeing the other so *childish* for the first time in a long while.

"That's a good Mackerel," he purrs. "How's the crab?"

Dazai licks his lips, almost chasing the sweetness of the meat. "Divine."

"Do you think it's a decent quality?"

"I think I'm in heaven."

"Oi, try not to moan." Not *yet,* he thinks, suddenly considering skipping the shoot. He can't, but he would *love* to flip off work and hide away with a Dazai someplace private. "Still want those crab cakes?"

As he bobs his head in agreement, Dazai's eyes *shine.* "Have I already told Chuuya I love him today?" He volleys back, all chipper.
The childish spontaneity forces Chuuya to crack a smirk. Sure. The crab has nothing to do with it, *obviously.*

"Jackass." He grins. "You just want to buy me."

"I would never try to sweet-talk Chuuya," Dazai says, slapping a hand above his heart. Yet there's something in his tone — a careless honesty stripped of any theatrics, some sort of axiomatic truth — that tells Chuuya he *is* being serious. "I mean it. It's a little bit silly, you know? All these years, and you still take my breath away."

Chuuya chuckles in response, and lands a soft punch on Dazai's shoulder and then pulls him in for a quick kiss. He ignores the glances that the other people throw at them from a few stalls away.
Feigning indifference, Chuuya allows them to silently laugh about how *smitten* he acts when Dazai looks at him like they are the only people in an overcrowded world.

For the first time in a long time, he's in a good mood.

—

It's a Wednesday morning.

Dazai has a class to teach with Professor Fukuchi in an hour. He'll be

late, but that's nothing new.
What *is* new is that, when he joins Chuuya in the kitchen for breakfast, Mitsuru is still sleeping in his bed.

She showed up at their doorstep the night before with eyes red-rimmed and puffy and Baki in her arms.

For a second, Dazai saw Chuuya panic; his blue eyes jumped from his sister to the cat, terrified.
Then, she asked them if it would have been okay to stay the night.

Her words still reverberate in Dazai's memory: an assignment gone wrong dragged her down a spiral of self-loathing. Up to that point, she had used uni work to distract herself and give her existence a purpose, but suddenly *that* was failing her too.
Her coping mechanism betrayed her.

So she broke down, and her housemate got spooked because she couldn't calm down and told her to 'take a breather or something'.

'It was *mortifying,'* Mitsuru said. Dazai knows it must have been scary, too.

"So we took the train here," she announced after that, lifting Baki as if to showcase the cat's presence, and her voice broke as she whispered that she just needed to have her cat and her brother around.

She didn't want to 'take a breather or something.'

She felt stupid and ugly, and alone.

'Maybe Tei-kun was right to leave me,' she said.
That's when Dazai trapped her in a hug. He hasn't heard Mitsuru call Fujiwara like that — as if they are still together, as if a fragile part of her misses him despite having moved on — in months.
He wonders if what Hikaru did to Fujiwara has anything to do with her reaction; if she feels responsible, somehow, or if a tiny part of her is just still clinging to the relationship.

She sobs harder in his arms, and Dazai hugs her tighter, kisses the top of her head and murmurs soothing words.

"My therapist says it's okay, that it will get better," she mumbles into Dazai's shirt. She's truly reassuring herself, he knows, but he gives an encouraging nod.

“Right,” he murmurs. “She’s right.”

“It doesn’t feel right.”

“You need to be patient. It’s okay. *Shh.* You’re okay.”

“Osamu,” her voice breaks, “please.”

He shushes her gently, patting her hair and holding her close. “It’s okay. I’m here.” She sobs harder. “Chuuya’s here too.”

On cue, Chuuya joins in the hug, too. He hides his face in Mitsuru’s shoulder, caressing her hair, and he says nothing.

They sleep like that, Mitsuru nestled between them in Dazai’s bed. It reminds him of the old days, when they were kids and he and Chuuya would crash in Verlaine’s bed, exhausted after a day spent running around.
Mitsuru always joined them at some point in the evening, despite the half-hearted protests that she was too old for naps and games — and they’d all end up in a puppy pile of sorts, fast asleep and holding onto each other’s clothes.

They’re grown up now, but sleeping in the same bed gives Dazai the same sense of reassurance as back then.

In the morning, Dazai makes pancakes (about the only thing he can scramble together) as Chuuya takes a shower. It feels domestic.
Hikaru texts him if they can meet somewhere private and Dazai replies with the usual generic 'Not today, I'm busy'.

It feels like they’re healing or that, at least, they are making baby steps in that direction. He can notice the little things in life again, from the nightly breeze to the orange light of the dawning sun, and is starting somewhat to appreciate them.

It feels like they are leaving behind their old ache and shedding the overused skin, ready for the summer that’ll come.

—

Eventually, Chuuya realizes that getting used to a new life feels like getting used to a new pair of shoes: it hurts until it doesn’t anymore. Blisters form over his wounded heart, and they inevitably explode and bleed.

When that process eventually stops, it remains unclear if you got used to the new situation or just became immune to the pain that comes with it. Like an illness, like a nightmare. The blisters leave behind thick scars of *healed* skin, reminders of a pain that will always be there.

It takes weeks, at the beginning. It takes work. Winter rolls in and brings forward a trail of windswept days and skinny trees.

Dazai helps him through the change.
Mitsuru does the same as they support each other, close as twins, fierce as soldiers: as they stick together, Chuuya re-learns the definition of close-knit. The Flags stay by his side, too.

Dazai occasionally checks in on Hikaru, gently discouraging his proposal of sleeping together but never outright admitting that it's never going to happen — meanwhile, he and Odasaku try to no avail to contact his parents. Dazai can't force him to seek help, but maybe *they* can.

He's slippery, Hikaru, drifting in and out of Chuuya's radar.

"He's getting worse," Dazai tells Chuuya after every conversation with the boy, "but he's stubborn. I *try,* but he won't let me help."

"You're doing the right thing."

Dazai shakes his head. "I would never send him back to KF. *Never.* But I don't know what else to do."

Odasaku is handling it, though, and Chuuya has learned to trust the man.

Still, he's not surprised when Dazai tells him he can't sleep peacefully until he finds a way to make sure Hikaru is safe. Chuuya understands. His heart bursts with pride for his boyfriend.

During those couple of months, when at times he feels fine and, at others, the vivid consciousness that he lost his father sometimes hits him full-force and nestles at the forefront of his brain, Chuuya blesses the presence of his sister and his friends.
Most of all, he blesses his best friend's presence.

Eventually, the surface of his bleeding wound begins to heal.

Slowly, that is. Steadily.
Although part of Chuuya knows he will never outgrow the loss — and he will *always* see his dad's ghost nestled in the blue of his father's sad irises — he keeps on living. What other choice does he have, after all? He throws himself into new projects at work, and buries himself under an unmanageable workload just to have something to occupy himself with.

He gets his master's degree done, passing it with flying colors. Sigma even says he's proud of him, and it means the *world.*

D.O.A. offers him a permanent contract that is so appealing that Chuuya doesn't even consider refusing it for a second, screaming about it over the phone with Nikolai. Fyodor sends him flowers and a handmade dress. Dazai takes him to dinner, and they walk by the oceanside at night and, when their lips meet, the breeze runs gently through their hair and their bodies are warm and Chuuya's heart might just explode right there.
They almost don't make it home, laughing like kids.

And it's then, at a party Ice Man and Piano Man organized at the Old World, that Chuuya's existence is shaken *again.* Just another curve ball that was thrown at him by life.

For starters, he's drunk.

Not *too* drunk, but enough that he's laughing at Albatross' jokes without truly understanding what his best friend is saying.
He's standing on the little stage of the Old World and nursing a diet Coke (taking a break in between beers), watching Lippmann hand Dazai his own ass at billiards. Chuuya supposes that's Dazai's fault for even *thinking* he could challenge the king of billiards, though.

The techno bass throbs in his ears, setting the rhythm of his quickened heartbeat. It's a good night, he thinks, even if Fyodor couldn't make it. Mitusuru introduced them to her new not-girlfriend-but-maybe (one Higuchi: blonde, petite, Chuuya loves her already) and Sigma is heavily making out with Nikolai on a table as if the concept of privacy isn't even in his *dictionary.*
Odasaku seems comfortable enough, leaning against the billiards table with a subtle smirk on his lips and a beer by his side. Yes, it's a good night – the kind of night that seems impossible to ruin.

But life always has a way of ruining things.

Chuuya is explaining to Albatross his latest concept shoot when Dazai approaches them. Before the redhead can ever utter an ‘hey,’ he’s being kissed like they are the only people in the room.

“Hi, Slug,” Dazai says, voice raspy, brushing the tips of their noses together.

Chuuya *feels* a lovesick beam stretch his lips before he can control himself. “Hey, vagabond.”

“I miss you.”

“I thought you were too busy letting ‘Lip destroy you.”

“Yet *another* reason to miss you,” Dazai insists. He noses the side of Chuuya’s head, the tip brushing against his temple and sinking into locks of russet hair; he always has a cold nose, Dazai, and cold hands that quickly slip under Chuuya’s t-shirt.

“Just for the record, I’m here too,” Albatross adds, waving a hand.

When Dazai cocks an eyebrow in Albatross’ direction, it’s nervy and just a tinge unfriendly. “ Then go somewhere else?”

“Huh, *rude?”*

“‘Samu, what the fuck?”

“Yeah, that came out horrendously,” Dazai groans, sheepish all of a sudden, as he lowers over Chuuya’s ear shell. He still throws an apologetic glance at Albatross, bowing his head in recognition – *I misspoke, sorry* – and receives a nod back. “Sorry, ‘Tross, that was stupid. Chuuya— can I steal you for a minute?”

A shiver runs down Chuuya’s spine. He nods, as he understands Dazai’s need to decompress, but the gesture is small and dazed. He will go anywhere, as long as Dazai holds his hand.

"Let’s go," Chuuya mumbles under his breath as he takes Dazai's hand, leading him away from the crowded party and towards the staff room.

The softest smile blooms on his lips when Lippmann winks at him just before they disappear into the empty room, Dazai trailing behind him like a quiet ghost. His frame is willowy, his touch light, and his steps resound familiar as he follows Chuuya.

Every party like this (and seeing the Flags open their ranks to engulf Dazai's presence, because seeing Albatross pick on Piano Man's '*mid, boring playlist'* is nothing short of a privilege) reminds Chuuya that, despite the hiccups on the road, they are getting to a brighter place in their lives. Dazai has good, real friends, and that means more to Chuuya than he can express with words.

His heart slows down the second they slip into the staff room. Tall iron shelves tower over the narrow space, blissfully deserted. Behind the cream-white walls of the cramped room, the beat of the music pulsates in an undercurrent of energy. The flickering light bulb above their heads, barely holding on, casts erratic shadows on the walls – and Chuuya muses that Ice Man *really* needs to either change the decor or start renting the space out for horror movies.

But it'll have to do, for now.

The sudden change of light and a whiff of dust make Dazai sneeze, and Chuuya chuckles as he carefully closes the door behind his back. Then, expectation knotting his stomach, he looks at Dazai with an arched brow. *Well, bandages,* he silently urges, *stop wastin' time and kiss me already*.

"God, this party is a circus," he says instead, running a hand through his red hair to refresh his hairstyle – loose bangs, carefully styled to appear *careless.* There's nothing even remotely careless in his look, though, *ever.* You don't make money as a makeup artist by being careless. "I can't believe 'Tross and Lippmann thought it was a good idea to invite half the city."

Dazai gives him a smirk, leaning against the peeling yellowish paint.

"It wouldn't be a proper party if it wasn't overflowing, now, would it?"

"The Old World is too small for this kinda thing."

"Afraid the crowd will jeopardize your usual truth or dare game, later?" Dazai teases, and he sounds sharp-edged again. Jagged. "Come on, chaos is fun."

"You're the only one who enjoys chaos."

"I must admit, I don't mind parties where everyone is too busy to notice we've sneaked away," he amends, mirth dancing at the end of his honed smirk. It softens his voice, too.

Chuuya rolls his eyes, ignoring how Dazai confidently steps closer to trap him in between his body and the wall. Damn it. Dazai *knows* how to make his throat go dry, for sure. He knows how to move. He's using every *inch* of their height gap, the bastard, but Chuuya is definitely not complaining.

"Is that so?" he drawls back.

The ferocious gleam in Dazai's eyes rolls a single drop of anticipation down his spine, thick and burning like liquid mercury. His boyfriend's eyes dart to his lips. "Speaking of things I *do* enjoy— is that a new shade of lipstick?"

Chuuya smirks, but he tilts his head to the side. He does his best not to fold — not *outright,* at least — at the enticing way Dazai has been stealing glances at his mouth. He has got to at least pretend he has some dignity left, right? He can't just *melt.*
But it's funny how Dazai is asking that just before smearing said lipstick and kissing it away, as if he's acknowledging Chuuya's effort right before getting messy with it.

"You noticed, huh? 'Wanted to make sure I look good tonight."

Dazai's grin widens as he leans in, their lips hovering milliliters from one another. "For me?"

"Don't get cocky," he says.

Yes, for you. Who else?

The unspoken truth remains trapped on Chuuya's tongue as Dazai bends to kiss him.

Their lips meet, and Dazai's hand cups his jaw with cold fingers, and Chuuya *swears* the universe comes to a halt. His heart wraps around the feeling, greedy for its tenderness.
Being kissed by Dazai's careful lips is warm and fondant and *enveloping,* like walking inside a warm house with a crackling fireplace after a day in the snow.
Like stepping on land after years at sea — that reassuring stillness and unyielding trust of returning to the quintessential status of tranquility. He's where he belongs.

Chuuya thaws in the delicate brush of Dazai's lips against his. It sends a shiver of happiness up his limbs.

It's a simple kiss, nothing too passionate or hungry, but it's effervescent with silent promises of more to come.

He can taste the faint hint of beer and wine on Dazai's tongue, his nostrils filled with the boy's cologne as Chuuya breathes him in — the more their mouths work one against the other, the more it creates a flavor that's undeniably *them*.

In months of their relationship, Chuuya has learned to pinpoint the exact scent of their life together, the texture and color of it. Candlelight and cashmere and coffee. Books. Beer and popcorn.

It's only been a handful of months, but Chuuya could fill an entire album of things that remind — no matter how *tangentially* — of them.

The stolen kiss lingers for a heartbeat, and Chuuya's heart flutters and his toes curl up inside his boots as Dazai opens his mouth and gently encourages him to do the same. His thumb presses over Chuuya's chin, oh so delicate.

And, in that brief moment, all the chaos of the party fades into the background as the redhead relaxes against the wall.

The world narrows down to just the two of them, locked in the staff room. When they break the contact, Chuuya's cheeks are tinged with a faint blush and his gaze is fixed on Dazai's eyes.

"Ya know what's weird?" He hums, talking against Dazai's mouth. *Into* the kiss, almost. "The party is chaos, yeah?"

"H'm."

"But I have a feeling you'll always see me even in the shitty chaos out there."

Dazai chuckles, his fingers lightly tracing Chuuya's jawline. "I'll always find Chuuya."

But then, as Dazai leans in for another kiss, Chuuya's eyes catch something amiss.
His gaze darts to his boyfriend's wrist and he freezes, a flicker of concern crossing his features. "Wait," he murmurs, his voice low as he reaches for Dazai's arm.

The other furrows his brows, pausing in his attempt to kiss Chuuya again to follow his gestures. "What?"

Without a word, worry mounting in his stomach, he reaches out and takes Dazai's hand, his fingers brushing over the bandages wrapped loosely around Dazai's palm and wrist. When he rolls back the sleeve of Dazai’s grey shirt, the gauze is brown with dried-out blood. "Oi," Chuuya says, his voice dipping as his eyebrows furrow. "What happened?"

“Ah, it’s just a cut. I guess it got reopened or something.”

“Looks like a lot of blood.”

“It’s nothing.”

“When did you— Did you fall?”

Dazai hesitates, his usual nonchalant mask slipping away as his eyes scan the blood and the gauze. Some brown stains have ruined the shirt’s cuff, too. "Don't worry about it."

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re bleeding.”

“I—“

Cuts that got reopened? Chuuya’s mind screams. *These look fresh.*

And he’s not one to let things slide, especially when it comes to Dazai – *especially* when there’s something in the other’s evasive nervousness that tells him that he’s *not* being confronted with the truth.
Suddenly, he remembers how Dazai took a long time in the shower. How he disappeared in the bathroom before playing with Lippmann, too, and returned adjusting the cuffs of his shirt.

And it was all normal, but Dazai’s attitude about it is *everything but.*

The brunet’s shoulders are taut as he offers Chuuya his arm, not even bothering to *pretend* he’d rather do anything else but face this conversation.
A deafening worry surges with every passing second, blood rushing in his eardrums and his heart thudding in his chest as he unwraps the bloodied bandage.

He can't bear the thought of Dazai being hurt.
He can’t deal with yet another loss, and he knows Dazai's bravado is nothing but a fragile shield against life's harsh reality.

This blood is definitely kind of fresh, his mind yells.

The room is heavy with silence, Chuuya's heart racing faster with every new inch of freed skin.

How did they go from hiding to kissing to hiding to unveil wounds?

You imbecile, his brain screams at him. *When was the last time you touched Dazai without the bandages?*

As the last patch of reddened gauze falls away, Chuuya's eyes focus on the inside of Dazai's arm.

The sight awakens a candle at the base of his throat, and suddenly he's *suffocating* in smoke. As he stares, the smoke keeps rising, slowly poisoning him as he can't peel his gaze away from the cuts.
Plural. A voice tells him he should have seen it coming, and the candle keeps burning.
He keeps on choking.

Dried blood stains Dazai's skin, a stark reminder of the pain his boyfriend endured. His breath quickens. Chuuya's touch is light as his fingers trace the edges of a fresh wound covered in a thin layer of brownish blood. It's not deep, but its clean edges yell at the redhead that he's nothing but a fool. It's red, meticulous, small; surrounded by pink, older scars scattered like stars on the inside of his arm. One, two, three, *a hundred* tiny cuts.

"'Samu," he says, fighting to keep his voice leveled, staring at his boyfriend's arm – when he tries to look for Dazai's gaze, though, he can only see the half-profile of Dazai's head. His fringe covers his eyes. "This is not a casual wound." It's not a question, and he wishes it were.

"No," Dazai whispers, "it's not."

"What the *fuck* is this?"

As he lifts his head, Dazai looks at him with empty eyes. He looks dead already; a part of him is, at least.

"Dreams," he murmurs.

No, his mind screams. These are *cuts,* Dazai. Not fucking dreams.

This is you hurting yourself and making us all pay for mistakes Mori did, for damages someone else's caused.

This is the price for your so-called prodigy self; people burned you out like a house on fire until nothing was left but ashes and ruins.

And you see, Chuuya is not an idiot. He knows he *can't* fight Dazai's self-destructive tendencies, no matter how hard he tries.
Still, he's not going to watch and step aside and let this happen.

But then Dazai whispers: "Sorry, I was careless. I know I was careless," and Chuuya's stomach drops.
As if the problem is not what he's doing, but that he's *bothering* someone because of it.

"What the fuck," Chuuya murmurs, holding onto the man's arm careful not to hurt him. He can't hurt Dazai; he doesn't want to, despite the voice yelling at him to let go and run away. "When did you—" His voice trails off, panic kicking in. "—When did it start?"

How did you start, he means, *and why did I not notice you were going down this spiral? How?*

As Dazai drops his head, shaking it oh so slightly as if he can't find enough air in his lungs to answer, a sense of defeat washes over Chuuya.
They just lost a war.
They just hit a wall.
And what is worse, Chuuya has not even seen the wall coming in the first *fucking* place.

"It just got more frequent recently."

"Okay," he murmurs.

"But it started after the funeral," he whispers. A chill rushes down Chuuya's spine.

"Are you *shitting* me?"

"No, I'm not. I— *You—"* Dazai stops, then. Chuuya's blood runs cold; he's suddenly imagining the never-ending list of all the accusations his boyfriend could throw at him after that pause, but then Dazai swallows. With tender fingers, licking his teeth as if to find the courage to speak, he cups Chuuya's cheek and leans closer. There is nothing but gentleness painted on his face. "—You have nothing to do with this, Chuuya. This is all me."

"This is not you, 'Samu."

“I’m messed up.”

“You are a part of me.”

Chuuya’s voice breaks with that, shattering against the sense of helplessness gluing him to the floor of the staff room. He’s useless. *Again.*

“Yes, I am,” Dazai answers. “And you are a part of me.”

“Then can you tell me *why* are you hurting like this, ‘Samu? What happened?” He moves closer, and he’s holding onto his boyfriend’s bandaged arm so strongly that he realizes a second too late his fingertips will bruise the skin. Not that it *matters.* Dazai’s body is already ruined, and that’s what makes it beautiful; an unearthly fragility, a genius brain in a breakable shell.
The static air of the staff room has not changed, but physical coldness has nothing to do with the icy chills jolting down Chuuya’s spine as he pushes closer to the other’s space. He can’t look at the cuts.
That’s not what he wants to *remember* about his boyfriend’s skin.

“Is that why you’ve been wearing the bandages all the time, lately?” he pushes, hoping for an answer.

“You shouldn’t have found out.”

“Well,” he snaps before he can stop himself, “I *did.”*

“I didn’t want to burden you,” Dazai whispers back, looking at the floor. Dark bangs cover his face again. “I understand if you want to go back to the party and not see me for a while. It’s okay. I can wrap up the bandages back on my own. I can—”

“Are you fuckin’ dumb?”

At this point, he doesn’t care if his voice keeps rising.
Leaving? What the fuck. That’s fucking *unbelievable.* As if there’s a single chance in hell that he’s going to leave now when his best friend needs him the most. He made a promise; he has a corner to guard, and he has Dazai’s blind side to cover. They are together against the world.

But what the *fuck* is he supposed to do, when he’s fighting *Dazai?*

He clings to the other’s arm, stronger this time, and then he lets go to frame Dazai’s face. The touch prompts the man to turn his head and

look at him, lips pursed and skin tone greyish under the flickering lightbulb. The urge to see the eyes he knows *so* well suffocates him. When the other stares back at him, his eyes are dry – murky, dark, and tearless. They are the *saddest* fucking eyes Chuuya has ever seen.

"'Samu," he murmurs, willing himself to be gentler this time. It's a conscious effort, and it takes all of Chuuya's patience and then some more. He loves Dazai, normally. He has to *remind* himself he loves him now, though. "Let's be fucking clear: I am not going anywhere. I'm not leaving you like this — or *because* of this, by the way. It would be an asshole move."

And despite everything, I am not an asshole.

Swallowing, the other nods. He takes a moment to evaluate the situation as his eyebrows knit, dark shadows over the paleness of his forehead. "You're angry."

"Well, aren't ya a genius," Chuuya answers. He can't help himself, really, even if he *knows* he shouldn't say it. "Hell yes, I am angry. I'm mad and worried sick because I *care*." His voice splinters. "I care about you more than anyone else in the world."

"H'm," Dazai murmurs, almost ashamed. And Chuuya can't help but think that he has nothing to be ashamed of; being in pain is not a *fault.*

It's fine to need help.

"But I'm also in your corner, right where I was before seeing—" He wets his lips, lifting Dazai's wounded arm; wishing he could turn back time, *"—This."*

This is going terribly, Chuuya thinks.

The truth is, he has no idea about how he should react. It's probably showing that he is quoting what he skimmed in some website proselytizing self-help nonsense, but the truth is that he's terrified of blabbing out the wrong thing and making everything worse.

He's angry and terrified of losing Dazai, too.

The last thing he wants is to say the wrong words that will shove Dazai off the edge, out of everyone's reach. What do you say to someone who's hurting?

Most of all, what do you say when you're hurting just as much?

It's a fucking mess, he thinks. *They* are a fucking mess.

Suddenly, the perspective of pushing his best friend deeper into a spiral blocks the words in his throat.

When Dazai doesn't answer, Chuuya feels like *screaming*.

"Samu," he begs. "Let me stay."

"You don't want this burden."

"You're not a burden."

"I *am."*

Chuuya frowns. "Try me," he says, when all he wants is to scream that, then, Dazai should have left him alone. He should have been respectful enough to keep him out from the beginning, to never make him believe they could have a future — that they could be fated in some ways and then others.

But he *didn't*.
Dazai offered him a peek of what they could be, and there is no way Chuuya can unsee it now.

Now he wants that future, and he'll fight for it.
He'll fight until he bleeds, or worse.

"Seriously, Chuuya. You can't help and, more importantly, you don't *have* to help."

"I *want* to help," Chuuya insists — but he doesn't fully believe it either, as if something ugly is holding him back. Frustration simmers in him.
He's had so much on his plate, lately, that part of his brain is just screaming for him to leave the room, ignore what just happened and return to the party.

Disappointment, fear, and anger blend under his skin.

He wants to kiss Dazai, and shake him, and *scream* at him, but the silence stretches and he does nothing.

"I am sure you do, Chuuya, but you're not listening. What I am saying is that I can't ask for your help," Dazai says back, voice empty.

Dragging every sound, injecting it with silence. “I know you like the back of my hand. So… if you want to slap me for fucking up, now, you can.” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, pushing his hair away from his forehead. “Do it.”

“I won’t *hit* you, idiot, what the hell are you thinking?”

“Do you want to, though?” He grins. It’s empty. It’s sneering. “You hate me now, don’t you?”

“I don’t.”

He does. A little.

But he loves him, too.

“You just lost your father,” Dazai says – and it sounds equally like an apology and an explanation of why he’s doing all this. Chuuya’s mind stutters, forcibly working through the words as he tries to dissect them: Dazai is talking as if that contributed— at least partially — to the reason why he is hurting.

As if watching Chuuya suffer fed the demons in his head. His first instinct is to say it’s unfair; he swallows it back because no one cares about what’s fair *now*.

“Trust me, I know,” he hisses. His voice rises — not in volume, but in intensity.

“That’s why—”

“Have you ever fuckin’ considered that is why I can’t lose you too, you *dipshit?”*

It’s violent enough that it makes Dazai flinch.

He blinks. “Ah,” he says, as if being missed is a novel concept to him. It’s new and surprising: welcome to the world, Dazai Osamu, where people will get attached to you and weep over your grave once they have to bury you. It sucks. But that’s that.

“At least don’t be an asshole and shut me out *now*,” Chuuya growls.

“I’m trying to say that for your sake.”

“Did I fucking *ask* you?” He roars back. “Osamu, just— *fucking hell.* Trust me a little, too.”

“You know I trust you.”

“Then now is the time to show it.”

As Dazai gnaws at his bottom lip and stares at him with big lucid eyes, shiny as molten honey in the semi-darkness of the room as he goggles as though the rug is suddenly pulled from under him, Chuuya realizes he might have pushed him too far.

He might have hurt him too much in the past months, relying on his boyfriend and assuming he was fine enough to take the heat.

He hurt Dazai, or someone else did.

Someone—

“Osamu,” Chuuya calls. Then he stops and bites his inner cheek, slowly, afraid of even thinking about the implications of what he’s saying. “Did somebody give you that shit?”

Helpless, his question crashes against a joyless smile.

“Don’t be absurd,” Dazai answers.

“Who?”

No answer.

“Who, ‘Samu?”

No fucking answer.

“Was it someone I know?” One person comes to mind. One person who was always a little too *eager* to help, and that has seen Dazai at his worst. A person who has been living in the dark corners of their lives, preying on the moments of vulnerability.

Chuuya inhales, and it clicks, and it makes so much sense that he wants to slap himself for not noticing it before; a part of the Kokiden Foundation lives on in the heart of a child who lost a part of his sanity in those walls.
A ghost, thirsty for blood — thirsty for *recognition.*

“Oi, don’t tell me… Was it Hikaru?”

The way Dazai flinches, mauled by the question, tells him everything he needs to know. Dazai, at last, lost this game of hide and seek.

Chuuya *found* him.

“Like I said, I have it under control and I’m going to stop,” Dazai says, eventually. “I’m quitting soon.”

Chuuya’s jaw sets.
For the first time, not without some effort now that his fingers have grown numb against Dazai’s arm, he lets him go.

Words were always useless between them.

Words never told Chuuya what he needed to know about his best friend – his *silences* did. Dazai speaks in silences, in chinks barely visible through the cracks of his many masks.
And that *little* sneaky bitch—

That asshole.

Anger simmers in Chuuya, painting his vision red. “I will skin the bastard alive.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Dazai says, going limp in Chuuya’s grasp. He feels like a ragdoll, a piece of fabric that smells like the boy Chuuya used to know. “I’m sorry. I have it under control. Don’t waste your time with it.”

“He’s *so* dead.”

“I threw the box away already.” He shakes his head, too, and it sounds apologetic as if Dazai blames himself for what happened — a broken record of half-assed apologies. “Can you let me handle it?”

“Absolutely fucking not. You’re done facing things alone.”

“But—“

“Trust, Dazai,” Chuuya reminds him. “It goes two ways.”

Lips pulled in a thin line, Dazai nods and cups Chuuya’s cheek firmly. The touch causes Chuuya to whimper, half-defeated. “It’s just that you have your own things to deal with,” he says, voice leveled. “But that’s fine, then, and you are right. I *do* trust you.” His expression softens. “So can you do the same, too? the last thing I want is to upset you. I’ll be fine before you know it.”

And Chuuya would like to argue that he *always* trusts Dazai; instead, he frowns.

“Can you talk to Odasaku, too?”

Dazai nods. “I will, I promise.”

“I’m done letting you get hurt while I’m not around.” He stops as a shiver runs down his spine. He could lose Dazai *again* to a psychiatric facility, and God knows what could happen after. “I can’t lose you again. Not you too.”

Dad is enough. I can’t do it anymore.

“You won’t,” Dazai whispers. His thumb skims over Chuuya’s jawbone. “Chuuya will never lose me.”

“But you’re hurt.”

“You are hurt too. I am worried for you, Chibi.” The smile that crosses Dazai’s face is feeble — a candle ready to wink out. It’s weak to the point that Chuuya fears that he’ll blink, and the love of his life will be gone. Just like that, he’d be losing half of his heart. “Ain’t that on brand, for us? We stick together no matter what hurts us.”

“Are we sticking together, though?”

“We are. I promise,” Dazai murmurs. “I swear.”
The old promise should sound encouraging, but it’s not; it only sounds *tired.* “And you can lean on me, okay? I’m here for you. Don’t think I didn’t notice that you still pick your hands.”

“Yeah. You literally all my hands all the time.”

You stop me from hurting myself, he thinks, *but you never allowed me to stop you.*

“It’s okay. I like holding Chuuya’s hands, anyway.”

“And you made me eat.”

“I just want to help.”

Slowly, Chuuya nods. He has picked up the habit of pulling out tiny bits of his own eyelashes and hair, soon after the funeral; it started with false eyelashes and peeling off fake nails, and he still has to find ways to stop. “I know.”

“We talked about it.”

“We did.”

“How are you?”

“I’m— shaken,” Chuuya admits, after a moment. “I think I need a moment.”

“I love you,” Dazai says. It might seem out of context, but it’s *not.* There’s nothing more terrifying than going through such an abysmal loss alone, tiptoeing around the person who should be your emotional support. But Dazai tugs him in, hugging him tight, pressing his face into his shoulder. Instinctively, Chuuya nuzzles into the crook of his neck, dragging in a deep inhale.

The cold air burns in his lungs. Dazai smells *green;* mint-green, and coffee-black.

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” the brunet murmurs, voice husky and fingers steady as he cradles Chuuya’s neck. “What can I do?”

Chuuya swallows. “Just hug me?”

And Dazai *does.* He hugs him for what feels like a lifetime, kissing the side of his head. He murmurs gentle words in Chuuya’s ear, and they all sound true and raw.

“You are my world, you know?” He says, and Chuuya drowns in it.

As they stay there for a while, hugging one another as the world flows around them, Chuuya just wishes that hug could be enough to mend Dazai’s wounds.
Knowing that his fathers always taught him to avoid revenge, he wishes he could turn the proverbial new leaf and forgive Hikaru for all the things he’s done.

He’s forgiven Mori, after all, as long as the man stays a thousand miles away from Dazai.
But Hikaru touched *his* best friend in too many ways, he attacked the hard-earned fortress of the man’s self-improvement — and that is unforgivable.

Helpless, Chuuya wishes he could take back his own request and stop his boyfriend as Dazai kisses his forehead with infinite tenderness. Then he apologizes once again, tells Chuuya he’ll go find Odasaku and walks out of the staff room.

Although he keeps his eyes closed for one minute longer, breathing in the dust of the staff room, Chuuya can *picture* the brunet adjusting his shirt and wrapping his bandages back in place.
He will plaster a cheeky smirk on his face and pretend it's all good. He can imagine Dazai as he returns to the mash of unaware people waiting for him, and he hates that he can't stop him from leaving.

He can only follow Dazai, keeping a close eye on the man, watching his every step and hoping that they will discuss everything again after the party – with heads clearer and less alcohol in their bodies, that would be good.

They never do.

When Dazai apologizes again in the morning, Chuuya realizes that he can't feel anything but righteous fury. He's furious. Angry as hell. And he needs to do something about it.

—

"I have been kind to you, you know."

It takes Hikaru not more than a second to recognize the voice, and way less than that to realize that he's in trouble. He tosses the cigarette to the ground, lifting his eyes to meet the newcomer — someone who *should not* be in an empty parking lot in the middle of the night.

Nakahara Chuuya is just not *that* kind of boy.

He's all makeup and fancy parties, he's motorbike rides and home-cooked dinners and flashing smiles. He's boring.

The night is not for him.

Yet here he is.

And he's beautiful, Dazai's Slug. His *Chuuya.* He's standing taller than his height, hands hidden in his red hoodie, and he sports a furrowed brow that looks like a storm.

Serene, Hikaru takes his time to scan the other's face — his nervy frame, his solid steps.

How he *hates* Chuuya. It's so easy to hate him, the kid who had it all and never once valued it. So handsome and loyal and accomplished. If

Dazai were to die, it'd be with Chuuya's name on his lips. Dazai always loved the guy even if he deserved *nothing.*

Hikaru *hates* him.

Without Dazai around, he drops the mask. There's no need to act friendly with the man who stole his best friend, right?

"Kind?" He echoes, stepping toward Chuuya. The soles of his shoes creak under the grovel of the parking lot. He has to give it to the Slug: he doesn't back down. Whether that's the brave choice or the stupid one, that remains to be seen.

"I've been nice," Chuuya amends. "You gave me nothing but fucked-up energy, and still I played the part of the good boyfriend."

"You are a good actor, yes," Hikaru concedes. His smile is as fake as Chuuya's so-called kindness, but he's not making any effort either. "You did that for 'Samu, though, so don't come at me with that victim mentality. How did you find me?"

Chuuya scoffs. "I just asked Nik where I could find the worst shit in town, and I figured it would lead me right to you."

"Good things come with a risk attached."

"Where did you learn that?"

"*Places."*

Chuuya steps closer, and Hikaru doesn't move. "Ya waiting for a dealer?"

"They are late, if you must know," Hikaru answers, quietly. It makes him *uneasy to* know that people with his stuff are late. He needs it. He hopes they haven't stood him up. "But yes. They've got more toys for me."

There's no need to pretend he's clean around someone as boringly righteous as Chuuya. He won't snitch because he believes in meaningless lies like loyalty and friendship; he spent his life with a nauseating group of friends that like to make friendship bracelets and braid hair and pretend they don't subtly, *snivelly* detest one another's presence. The flag of friendship, huh? Cute. But in the real world, it's every man for himself. In the real world, everything is about fighting for more meds and drugs when there's not enough money to go

around, it's about being hit by your brother because he saw your father and mother doing the same.
It's about being alive only when you think of death.

"I thought you were going to leave," Chuuya says. There's no genuine interest in it, though.

"Not until they find me."

"What are you getting?"

"Why, that is an awful lot of questions you're asking."

"Just *answer,* asshole."

"It's none of your business," he replies, melodious. How he hates his own voice. If he had a raspy, deep, manly voice like Chuuya, would Dazai want him? Would Dazai love him? If he were more like Chuuya, would Dazai *see* him?

There's a tragic sense of abandonment in knowing that the boy you love — the only person who kept you somewhat sane through the years —will never love you back because he already has someone else. Someone who had the luck to be around before Hikaru was even born.

"It *is* my business if that's another present for my boyfriend."

Hikaru giggles. "Your boyfriend," he echoes. "'Samu is nothing that you can define *yours.* You don't understand him."

"Oh, right. Because *you* understand him so damn well, right?"

"I understand his mind," Hikaru says.

He understands Dazai's *dreams.* They are bloodied, and chaotically beautiful. They shared so many cuts, by now, that their minds are blended into one. They shared too much, in empty bathrooms with stolen blades, to ever be considered 'strangers'. They have peered into each other's wounds, opening them up with bloodied fingers.

"You're sick," Chuuya says.

It's a declaration — as if this well-raised, middle-class jock knows anything about Dazai as if he knows anything about *them* and their time at KF. In response to it, cracking like a live wire jumping with electricity, annoyance bubbles in Hikaru.

Chuuya was never at KF with them, although his presence haunted Hikaru every single day. He has no idea what *sick* means.

And he would rather not be *mansplained* on the meaning of sickness by an insipid boy who has never stepped into an ice-cold shower after queuing for a gram of drugs.

“I would gladly die with him,” Hikaru says, jaw setting in unspoken anger. He’d punch Chuuya until his knuckles bleed if he could, but then Dazai would be crossed with him and that’s *really* not worth the fuss. “I will go to the end of the world for him. Meanwhile, all your hypocritical ass can do is *judge* him and selfishly ask him to be in your stupid corner. Can’t you see it’s hurting him? Don’t you have fucking *mercy?! You* are destroying him.”

Wide-eyed, Chuuya gapes. “…I just want him to live.”

“Living is a condemnation to suffering.”

“He’s getting better, and you giving him *shit* won’t change that.”

“I’m giving him an out because I love him,” he claps back.

In comparison, Chuuya’s murmured answer is unbearably feeble, as if he never meant to speak at all. “Fuck you,” he whispers, spite seeping through his posture even though his voice shakes and his cheeks are drained of color. “Whatever insane batshit stuff you think is going on here— *that* is not love.”

A laughter bubbles in Hikaru’s throat.

See? Chuuya doesn’t understand it. People like himself and Dazai aren’t meant to be alive at all. They are ghosts of the earth. They are placed amidst humans to test the boundaries of human suffering, and then destined to find relief in the embrace of death.

Ryuunosuke Akutagawa. Mishima. Chatterton. Sylvia Plath. Sid Vicious. Van Gogh. All great hands take their own lives, sooner or later.

And he would love Dazai anyway, Hikaru.

He loved him alive, and would love him dead. He’d love him *to* death. As their flesh is being ripped away from their bones, and their mouths are filled with worms, and their blood is nothing more than mud and rain— yes, he would love him. They’ll be perfect, and they’ll be

forever. What does Chuuya *know* about forever? He's so disgustingly set on living a handful of *years.*

Hikaru wants so much more: he and Dazai will be holding hands as they bid farewell to the world. They'll laugh as they jump from the rooftop of the Kokiden Foundation's building, one last farewell to a world that never valued them; that ignored their lights, yes, but mostly their shadows.
And Dazai will be in him, he'll love only *him,* and Hikaru will be *seen* at last.

But, when Dazai told him he would never love him — a temporary mistake, no doubt — the last abused string of Hikaru's sanity snapped nonetheless. Untethered, it flew away and Hikaru waved at it and let that burden go.

"'Samu and I kissed," he says, finally breaking the silence.

It's not *true,* but he wishes it was — and doesn't that wish make it true, too? Intention and wishful thinking *manifest* things. It happened in his mind. It can happen again. And he's sure that, in another life, Dazai kissed him. Dazai loved him. He's sure it happened, and that makes it *true.*

Besides, the way Chuuya flinches is priceless. He's not so smug anymore.

"What the fuck did you s—"

"You *heard* me."

"That's not true."

"It is," he says, with a smile. "At the Old World, after your cheesy gig, after I told him about Fujiwara and while you were too distracted by your friends to notice him. *I* was there for him, and he was so proud of what I had done. He says he *needed* it — that he has a duty toward you, but that's all." With a wave of his hand, he gestures toward the redhead. "He stays with you out of *pity* because of your father, isn't that encomiabile? But pity-fucking must not be *that* satisfying, because he was hard in no time. Ah, and he called you a dog, which is an upgrade from *slug* if you ask me."

" *You little shit,"* Chuuya hisses.

For a moment, Hikaru is sure that Chuuya will thrash him about and

smash his head on the ground. He'll hit him until he dies.

Instead, he just steps closer. Hikaru doesn't move. He's not scared. He'll welcome *death* gladly, and would gladly drag Nakahara Chuuya with him.

Chuuya stops a millimeter away from him, fisting the collar of his jacket, so close that Hikaru can almost imagine the taste of his pout. He could kiss Chuuya now. God, he *would.* That would be fun. Not because he wants to, but because it would disgust the redhead enough to make him feel as dirty as Hikaru feels every day. It'd *violate* him. And it would make Chuuya a cheater — which means, it would make him hate himself a little. It's fun. Hikaru hates himself a *lot.*

But Chuuya doesn't deserve to feel misery and despair, either.

That's just for himself and Dazai — it's *their* special place, and Chuuya would ruin it. So, when Hikaru pushes closer, it's just to *speak* against Chuuya's mouth.

"You're so selfish. 'Samu is *stuck* with you because he feels sorry for a whiny dog."

The hatred in Chuuya's eyes, entirely black in the night, tells him that the redhead could murder him twice. One for Dazai, and one for *himself.*

"Fuck you."

"What was that promise of yours?"

Chuuya stops for a second, stunned as if Hikaru slapped him with the accusation — the knowledge that Hikaru is using it against him flashing in his eyes as if Hikaru just played dirty. As if they owed any kind of loyalty to one another, mortal enemies as they are.

'I'll marry 'Samu when I grow up', huh? How ingenious. How simple-minded. This selfish shrimp never considered they might not grow up at all.

"Shut up," Chuuya hisses; his voice trembles, as if the redhead is talking to his own brain rather than to him.

"He's just keeping it because you have no one else."

"You're lying."

"Ask him," he answers, tilting his chin up. "Ask him also if he didn't

dream thanks to me, while you're at it. Ask him about the night he confessed he never loved you."

Hikaru gasps when Chuuya's hand slips up to grasp his throat, jerking him against the pink-painted net that confines the park. For a moment, he allows a cold surprise to wash over him. He fights to take a mouthful of air, but Chuuya doesn't let go.

He can feel his pulse around Chuuya's grip.

"Fuck you. Stay away from Dazai."

"Too late~" Hikaru chants. "If you loved him, you'd let him go. He and I share something you will never have."

They shared blood. It's almost a dark wedlock of sorts, isn't it? A blessed wedding in the name of pain.

Almost sneering, Chuuya presses him against the iron net, grasping his collar so *tight* that Hikaru gasps around a wheeze. The man's gums are so close that the reflection of his spit looks glossy in the night.

He snarls like a dog, too. *Figures.*

"He is mine*,"* he growls. "You get close to him ever again, and I beat you to a fucking pulp."

Hikaru smiles. "Is that so?"

"I will find you. I swear to God, I *will* kill you no matter where you hide."

Ah, at last, Hikaru thinks.

"Suit yourself," he murmurs, but Chuuya doesn't seem to hear it.

The roaring of the road nearby fills his head, and Chuuya's grip grows harsher before letting him go. As Hikaru watches the redhead's figure disappear in the shadows, he knows he'll wait for Dazai to change his mind.

He'll wait for him in hell. He'll wait, for their love is fated. It's grand.

Nakahara *boring as fuck* Chuuya wants to kill him? He can try, for sure. It'd be fun. Hikaru never planned to live long, anyway.

—

When Chuuya trudges home, missing three trains and taking one in the wrong direction, the apartment is empty and the lights are off. Dazai's shoes are in the genkan, which means the man is already fast asleep in his bed.

A sense of coldness settles in his bones as he silently pads across the corridor and into his room, the smooth wooden floor almost wobbling under his unsteady steps. He needs to lean against the wall, regaining his footing, and he opens the door to his bedroom without making any sound.

He's welcomed by the familiar scent of freshly washed linens. The soft glow of a streetlamp filters through the curtains, casting a muted light on the made bed and the makeup scattered on his work table. He still needs to get rid of the notebooks and textbooks from his Master's.

It feels like a lifetime away, now. Another life, another *him.*

"Fuck," he murmurs, as he passes a hand through his hair and the heavy weight of the past days crashes over him. He just *wishes* the world could have mercy on him already. As he curls in a corner of his room, knees pressed to his chest and the hard floor under his body, he allows the world to turn and turn and turn until he feels nauseous.

This must be a joke, he thinks.

He *wishes* he could call Dazai, or Albatross, or Mitsuru. Instead, when he finds a phone number on the speed dial, it's Odasaku. He texts him that they need to meet — and that he needs to take Dazai away for the weekend, it doesn't matter where. Anywhere.
Because Oda knows Dazai better than anyone else, and because Chuuya is not *sure* how to face his boyfriend's pain without judging their relationship because of it.

Then, his fingers find Verlaine's name in his recent calls. He needs his father, and the line rings and he waits and his heart rate slows down.

It rings. And *rings.* He gnaws at his bottom lip when the line clicks, connecting the call.

"Dad?" He murmurs, without waiting for his father to speak. He hears Verlaine's breathing *first,* and it settles a spark in his body that thaws all the tension, all the fear. "Dad, hi."

"Chuuya?"

“Hey.”

“It’s late,” Verlaine answers, after a short pause. “You sound weird, mon rossignol. Is everything okay?”

I threatened a guy.

Dazai is hurting himself.

It’s too much. It’s all too much.

And I—

“I don’t know.”

— I’m hurting too, and I have no voice. No strength. I’m stuck in this heavy, heavy prison of silence.

“Oh, sweetheart. Should I get there?”

“No, no, it's okay. I just wanted to check in, ya know.”

“I’ll take the first train of the morning.”

Chuuya takes a deep breath — he inhales from the nose and the oxygen *burns,* it burns deep in his lungs. It burns as if his body is going to start a fire. “No, really, I didn’t want to bother you or shit. It’s fine. I just needed to hear your voice, I think.” He pauses, and his voice cracks. “Dad…” He sniffles, loudly stifling a sob against the back of his hand. He can still smell the air of the park on his skin, and it sucks because his *life* sucks. “…I miss dad. I guess.” When he tries to swallow, it tastes like dirt, like thick dust. Is this sadness polluting him from the inside? “I want him to come home.”

Is that stupid? Is that crazy?

"I know,” Verlaine says. “Me too.”

Is he insane?

Is he driving away everybody?

“I know I’ve never been really open about it,” he murmurs. He thinks about asking his dad if he has time to talk at all, if he’s bothering him, but suddenly he can’t shut up. Everything he has been trying to hold back for months starts pouring out. “And I haven’t really been there for you, either. I just— when I go to sleep, I hope to see him. And I

couldn't look at anyone, you or Micchan, without thinking that maybe I'm failing at everything. That I have never done something good enough to make dad proud of me."

Verlaine pauses. It's long, and it's *heavy,* and when he speaks again Chuuya realizes that he's seldom heard his dad sound quite so adult. He's jovial, normally, and ironic and charming. Seeing Paul Verlaine act like the adult he is, though? That's new.

"Oh, Chuuya. Your father was *immensely* proud of you."

It sinks in him like a stone. The tension hits him like a hook straight to his stomach.

Oh, Chuuya thinks. Oh. His breath stutters, and his bottom lip trembles and his lips can't stop curling down.

His cheeks are wet.

Fat tears roll down his face, uncontrolled, as he clasps a hand over his mouth and realizes that he has been holding on to something he can't control. Then, the truth he has been avoiding crushes over him like an avalanche.

His father is dead.

After saying goodnight to Verlaine, trying to stifle the sobs not to alarm him, Chuuya sits in the dimly lit bedroom, his phone clutched tightly in his hand as he curls into a tighter ball. He looks at his father's number, biting his bottom lip, and he allows all the recent events to wash over him.

He falls into a heavy silence, both inside and out.

It almost seems like his own lungs slowed down not to disturb the utter hollowness pervading him — sinking into his marrow, as he fights the urge to torture his fingers. Instead, he tunes in with something that he's always known. The white noise in the back of his head becomes a distinct voice: he's gone. It's okay.

You must remember but let go because living with this weight is just not feasible.

He hears it, now; what his father used to say, and he almost forgot. 'You two must live life at its fullest,' he used to tell him and his sister 'All human life is nothing but a pattern etched upon the material

world. *Beautiful* patterns. And they are unique, and they are precious. Be true to them, and live on.'

After what feels like a lifetime of immobility, rising from the floor is an exercise in self-control. He has to take a second to balance himself before he crawls across the apartment.

The journey to Dazai's room is a silent one as he makes his way through the darkness of the house.

When he pushes the door, it creaks.

He slips in with enough care not to create a mess, avoiding the parts of the wooden floor that creak and bend under his weight while he stares at Dazai's sleeping form.

He looks like a puppy, Chuuya thinks.

Dazai's breath is steady in the silence, his silhouette almost moveless except for a subtle breathing as he forms a scythe under the blankets. He looks like the moon. There's no need to undress. Chuuya curls up next to him above the covers, clothes and all.

In the comforting warmth, as his boyfriend naturally shifts to accommodate him, Chuuya finds a hint of solace to calm his turbulent emotions. He still smells like nightly air, like tears, but Dazai smells like sunshine and sleep. It almost causes Chuuya to cry again.

He drifts away with the steady cadence of Dazai's breath, and the memory of thick gauze wrapped around his wounds blurs out as he closes his eyes.

He breathes in.
Hikaru and Samu kissed, his brain reminds him, *that's what Hikaru said.*
He breathes out.

He'll ask Dazai, but he knows better than to trust anything that comes out of Hikaru's mouth.
He's not so easily swayed.

As he settles in, adjusting between Dazai and Samu the teddy bear, he notices the brunet slightly stirring. The gentle shift of the mattress, the slight movement beside him — it's all a subtle acknowledgment of his presence, as if an ancestral part of Dazai still understands his need for closeness through the veil of a dream. Dazai hugs him tighter, pressing him against his chest. He's never going to let go.

Chuuya falls asleep like that: with his boyfriend curled around him, embracing him from above the covers, and he feels human. He feels *centered*. Flesh, bones, blood and all.

Chapter End Notes

The 'You two must live life at its fullest' quote is from Rimbaud in Fifteen.

I care about this chapter a lot and I worked for months over the SKK conversation, so I really hope you like it □❤□

Chapter 14: First Love

Chapter Summary

> Chuuya looks at the boys in the photo, grazing the glossy surface of the Polaroid with unsure fingers. The picture is a little crooked and a little ruined — just like the flowers, just like them — but it’s theirs. It's *them*. Chuuya and 'Samu.
>
> *'You’re my one true love'.*

Chapter Notes

> Not going to lie, EiT has been a difficult fic. I have worked on the story for SO long to write it exactly the way I wanted — because it felt important and because it turned out to be so much deeper than I expected, but it's been a wonderful journey.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I really, really, *really* hate ‘Samu.”

Tachihara hands him a tissue with a tinge of insecurity, sheepish eyes wandering across Chuuya’s reddened face. He accepts the tissue with a trembling hand, loudly blowing his nose in it in the emptiness of the playroom. “And I hate Hirotsu-sensei too.”

Chuuya hates his best friend, as of five minutes ago. 'Samu made him cry, and that’s mean of him.

Fyodor has been calling 'Samu a dumb fish ever since, and then he offered Chuuya half of his lunch, but Chuuya thanked him and told him to save it. He’s not starving or anything. He’s just pissed.

Now, this whole thing would not have happened and Chuuya would not be crying if Hirotsu-sensei had not come up with the idea to make flower crowns to celebrate summer. Chuuya likes summer (it's when Samu's birthday is, after all) and likes field flowers, so he was excited about the day.

He knows that he’s not the best flower crown maker in town and that his taste ‘is tacky’ and that his flowers aren’t pretty, but 'Samu had no business calling it *ugly*.

Chuuya never wanted it to be beautiful.

He was just having fun. He could have made an ugly flower crown, as long as he was doing it with his friends. Instead, Dazai had to go and make fun of him — and Chuuya knows he is normally joking, but Dazai can get very mean at times. So Chuuya shoved him and ran away with Tachihara, because if his flower crown is *that* ugly he doesn't want to see it anymore.

"Dazai is just being stupid." Tachihara awkwardly leans forward to pat Chuuya's shoulder.

"Yeah. I know."

"Your flower crown was beautiful," he says, his band-aid following the movement of his nose.

Chuuya hums into the snotty tissue, blowing his nose again.

Maybe. Maybe not.

He didn't shove Dazai because of the flower crown, if he's being honest. Yes, that too, but he's really mad at his best friend because he's been acting weird and mean. When it happens, the butterflies in Chuuya's stomach turn into worms and he's suddenly squirming, feeling like he doesn't fit in anymore. That's the power 'Samu has over him: he makes Chuuya fit in.

Ever since Chuuya's birthday, Dazai has been acting evasive — dad taught him the word. It means he's not really present even when they're together. He is studying more and more with the grownups. Mori-San sent him to something called Crab School too (Oh. No. Dad said it's *cram* school, though 'Samu would surely prefer a crab school).

And Chuuya gets it: Dazai is smart, the smartest person around, and he'll skip grades and change schools before the end of their elementary years to go somewhere only geniuses are allowed. But for now, Chuuya only wants his best friend. He doesn't *care* about the genius, he cares about 'Samu.

And best friends don't insult each other's flower crowns. Even if they are ugly.

(Micchan said: *'Tell him he is a little shit.'* So Chuuya did exactly that.)

"*Huh, Chibi?"*

A tiny figure with a mop of brown hair saunters through the empty room, pale hands holding onto something that looks like a brand-new flower crown. Slowly, Chuuya lifts his head to inspect his best friend and the object in his hands. Camellias, as red as a fierce summer sunset. Like flames.
They're big and scarlet and sweet-looking, and Chuuya stares for a second at the fleshy petals. Then, he moves on to golden eyes and tiny dimples. He forces himself to look away before he can crack a smile because Dazai fixed his flower crown for him. He remembers to pout too, even if a little forcefully, because he's angry and they are fighting and he *hates* 'Samu.

(He really doesn't.)

"Chuuya," Dazai calls again – his name no louder than a whisper. He moves another step forward, and Tachihara instantly closes ranks around Chuuya.

"Piss off, Dazai."

"No one is speaking to you, Stupid-Tachi."

"Ha?! What did you *say?* "

"That you're dumb?"

"Wh—!"

"He's right, 'Samu. Go away."

The way Dazai's hands tremble around the flower crown because of the unspoken rejection causes Chuuya's stomach to do something funny, though. Maybe he needs a snack. Maybe Micchan spat in his lunch as she always threatens to do (she's mean).

He must admit that it's beautiful, 'Samu's flower crown. It looks like a prince's crown.

"I'm—" A pause. "I shouldn't have called your crown ugly."

That silly thing with his tummy happens again. Chuuya squirms in place, bottom lip jutting out. "Leave me alone."

"No."

"Yes."

“No,” Dazai insists, all but pressing his feet onto the floor and blowing up his cheeks. He’s taking an interesting shade of red, too, and Chuuya wonders if he has a temperature. That’d be bad. Because he might hate 'Samu, but he still cares about him more than anything else in the world. But the brunet boy stalks forward, swelling his chest, and he pushes past Tachihara to reach for Chuuya – to thrust the flower crown in his hands. “Here, I fixed it. It wasn’t all that bad, you know? It was just a little crooked an—” he stops just as Chuuya’s scowl turns thunderous, ready to fight again. He shoots a glance at Tachihara, unsure, and swallows. “I mean, I liked it anyway. Because *you* made it.”

“Liar,” Chuuya mumbles.

“I am sorry,” he repeats, with a frown that makes him look like a grown-up. “You can punch me if you want. I know you, I know you want to. Please, don’t cry.” Then, he steps back – and his face softens, eyes turning shy as he looks away and Chuuya can’t really see anything anymore but a faint blush tainting his cheeks. He’s murmuring, barely above a broken whisper, when he adds: *“I don’t like it when you cry.”*

Many years later, Chuuya is looking at the Polaroid picture of two smiling six-year-old children.

They’re holding hands, grinning at the camera while they wear matching flower crowns: red camellias and forget-me-not blue. Sunset hair, midnight hair. And how happy they look, those children who don’t know any better, with reddened cheeks and locked hands. They are missing a tooth or two, but they don’t care about it and don’t care about anything at all.

As he looks at the picture, Chuuya remembers it all.

He remembers how he lost a tooth later than anybody else, and started panicking, thinking he’d remain toothless, and how Dazai helped him calm down.

He remembers the flower crowns. They say that marrying your best friend can be the only way to be happy for the rest of your life because no one else will understand you quite as deeply as a friend.

What a shame that he and Dazai understand one another even better than that. What no one tells you is that your best friend can hurt you

in ways that other people can't imagine.

"I might hate you, sometimes," Chuuya murmurs to the boy in the picture, grazing the glossy surface of the Polaroid with unsure fingers. It's a little crooked and a little ruined — just like the flowers — but it's *theirs*. "But you're still my best friend."

You're my one true love.

—

Chuuya is not sure where he stands with Dazai lately. When he told him about the meeting with Hikaru, Dazai denied the kiss and Chuuya believed him wholeheartedly – it was surprisingly easy, when Dazai looked him in the eye and didn't try to escape the conversation.

"Hikaru said you kissed, you know?"

"What? That's— Absolutely no."

"So you didn't kiss him?"

Dazai blinked at him. "Of course not."

And that was that.

It wasn't a long conversation by all means, but the way Dazai hugged him from behind and pressed him against his chest, kissed the top of his ear and whispered *'I'm sorry you had to listen to those lies'* is an exercise in mutual trust. They didn't talk, but their actions screamed.

The silent but vehement denial seemed convincing enough, but Chuuya was left with a nagging doubt that refused to dissipate — not regarding the kiss, no, but regarding Dazai's stability.

He hadn't missed the eerie silence from his boyfriend regarding his own meeting with Hikaru. The lack of a true comment left him feeling strangely unsettled.

He knows Dazai loves him, but they have done nothing but hurt one another, picking at each other's insecurities like rabid dogs.

When he hears about Hikaru and the troubles he's been causing, Odasaku doesn't seem surprised.

To be fair, he didn't even seem fazed when Chuuya admitted he might or might not have threatened the younger boy, for Dazai's sake.

Instead, a subtle smile crosses his face.

The two of them are sitting side by side on a weathered bench, an old piece of wood positioned at the edge of a square sidelining the promenade, overlooking the vast expanse of the ocean. The late afternoon sun paints the sky with shades of orange and pink, casting a warm, soothing glow over everything. The breeze, infused with the briny scent of the sea, rustles through their hair — and Chuuya breathes it in and feels at home, somehow, more at home than he has ever been in Paris or in Tokyo or anywhere else in the world.

Chuuya's eyes are fixed on the horizon, where the sun meets the water, creating a shimmering pathway across the waves. The ocean stretches out endlessly, a deep blue canvas that seems to merge with the sky at the distant, hazy line of the horizon. The rhythmic sound of the waves crashing against the shore fills the air, a calming and hypnotic melody that serves as a reminder of nature's power.

Seagulls, their white wings outstretched, glide effortlessly against the backdrop of the setting sun. Their cries mingle with the sounds of the waves.

As Chuuya gazes out at the horizon, his thoughts drift toward the recent past. His eyes occasionally flicker to Oda as he recalls the night of the Hikaru incident with a hint of unease.

Something was lurking beneath the surface, something unspoken that he couldn't quite shake.

"Dazai always loved you," Oda says, crossing his legs as he makes himself comfortable. He seems too tall for most of the places in this city – his soul is too big and pure for a world of imperfections.

Oda Sakunosuke wants to be a writer, Dazai tells him. Looking at him now, under the gentle sun of the bay, Chuuya sees it too. There are people with many worlds inside of them, people bursting with stories not yet told. Those kinds of people are precious and rare, because they know how to listen.

They understand humanity on an intimate level, like gatekeepers of something the rest of the world has forgotten.

"I know," he whispers, turning the grape juice can in between his hands. The salty wind sweeps through his hair, and it seems to howl through him and split him apart.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean he is excusable.”

“I don’t want to throw around blame if that’s what you mean,” Chuuya replies. “But I need help. *We* need help.”

It takes courage to admit it – it takes pride in realizing that they started perfect yet broken at the same time. They need to clean up their edges, to smooth out their differences.

“You love Dazai, that much was clear from the second I saw you; and Dazai loves you.”

Chuuya snorts softly, crossing his legs and then uncrossing them. He can’t stay still. “Was that ridiculously clear too?”

“It didn’t have to be; Dazai told me so.”

“I see,” he murmurs. And that’s why they will be different: they stick together even if they are hurting, *especially* if they are hurting.

“But I think we are all adult enough to accept that people who love each other don’t always work well together.”

The comment sends a shiver down Chuuya’s spine. No, he thinks, they don’t have to. Life has taught him the harsh way that love doesn’t automatically mean that two people will be compatible — that’s how most regrets bloom: with love and an ‘almost’.

With a ‘yes, you could have been my person. In another life, that is.’

Most stories start with a ‘maybe’ and end with a ‘it’s so sad it didn’t work out in the end’ and, in both cases, it doesn’t mean love wasn’t there.

Maybe he and Dazai waited too long.

Maybe they spoiled their chance. But if they did and if they truly aren’t right for each other anymore, then Chuuya has no reason to be right for anyone else because there’s no one else he wants. His heart plays a melody only Dazai can hear. His entire being only says one name, one word.

And if they spoiled their chance, then he wants nothing else. The Cosmo Clock 21 can stop turning and everyone can go home.

After all, Chuuya always knew he would marry his first love or not at all. No one else would ever be the same as Dazai – because he knows,

he knows he'd spend his life comparing every single person to that first one. To that *right* one.

That is why, in short, he can't be satisfied with an 'almost' or with a 'maybe'.

"We *will* be together, though. We decided so, and it's our destiny," he answers eventually, with his full lungs. "We have to be together and are doing our best to make it work. It's not easy. Actually, it sucks. But as far as I'm concerned, there's no other option."

Oda hums, tilting his head back.

"What if you're not special?"

"We are."

"You're being stubborn."

"Maybe. I don't give a fuck."

Slowly, taking in his words, Oda's head plunges into a deep nod. A smile plays on his plump lips, nestled in a stubble that must have seen tidier days, as if he understands – as if he's agreeing with Chuuya's words. Suddenly, he realizes Oda hoped to hear *that* answer; he wanted the stubborn stupidity of a boy who has known only one love all his life, and the absolute refusal to budge in front of a perfectly realistic option.

The contentment in Oda's blue eyes tells Chuuya that, sometimes, acting like a stubborn mule *is* the right answer.

"Dazai is lucky to have you," Oda says. "You'd fight for him."

"He'd fight for me, too."

There's not an ounce of doubt in those words, not an iota of hesitation.

Maybe that's the problem, though: they have fought so much for each other lately, that they do not know what it means to be together in a time of peace.

They didn't have a single second of quietness. And it's time to understand that's not their fault, and accept that they won't have to fight all their lives. Dazai needs to live with the concept of quietness without being overwhelmed by his demons.

“I wanted to visit my family in Osaka for a weekend,” Oda says, lifting his eyes to the ocean. “I’ll take Dazai with me.”

Chuuya nods. “Yes, please. He needs a change of air.”

“And I’ll take care of the Hikaru situation.”

“Sounds good.”

“You want to come with us?”

Taken aback by the offer, Chuuya gulps. He licks his lips, gauging the possibilities opening in front of him.
Deep down, he knows what he has to do. He knows he has a place where he needs to return.
First he will call Mitsuru and remind his sister he loves her.
Then, they will take a train and go home.

He’ll go to the grave by the sea, and he will sit with his father and think that it is — after all — a nice spot to rest forever.

“No,” he murmurs, “I have something I need to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“H-m. I think I’ll go see my father.”

I need to visit dad’s grave and say goodbye.

—

In the end, Dazai ends up staying in Osaka for two full weeks, also attending a conference in Kyoto while Odasaku continues his research and visits his parents. He continues to see the therapist Mitsuru suggested to him via video calls. It helps.

The second he steps off the Shinkansen that started from Shin-Yokohama station three hours prior and takes him to Shin-Osaka, Dazai takes the first full-lunged breath in a long, long time.

He occupies an extra futon in Oda’s childhood bedroom, and they talk until late in the night and explore the bars and parks in the city.

Osaka is beautiful, too.

He sends pictures to Chuuya from the top of the castle and the gardens. Then, he climbs all the stairs twice because Chuuya texted

him that he likes the colors of the sky from the palace's terrace– so Dazai just *had* to video call him from there. All the stairs in the world are worth it if he gets to see the smile on Chuuya's face.

"You're having fun, Bandages," he said, "I'm glad".

Even though he does miss his boyfriend, Dazai couldn't find a single reason to refute that comment.

It's not his first time in the city, but everything in Osaka is so different from what Dazai remembered that he's not sure if he's living in his own skin anymore. The views of the castle, the tourists scurrying around, the long walks down the riverside when the trees are heavy with pink flowers. He enjoys the way his skin is slowly healing, even though the scars itch and his instincts scream at him in the dead of night.

Dazai enjoys the freedom of Odasaku's mother calling him 'son' even though he's not and making him breakfast, gushing over Odasaku's *'genius little protégé'* with a proud gleam in her eyes — the disinterested sparkle he has never seen in Mori, no matter how spectacularly he broke through the roof and exceeded expectations.

He enjoys the narrow alleys close to the stations, and the tiny pavements compared to the broad walkways in Yokohama and Tokyo. The aquarium and its tiny Starbucks and the blue statue in the windswept square. Odasaku takes him on a day trip to Nara, and he snaps about a thousand pictures of the deer and sends them all to Chuuya. 'They're taller than Chibi,' he captions them.

Chuuya immediately calls him to give him an earful, but also to hear how he's doing.

"I miss you," Dazai says over the phone, his stomach tangled with emotions.

He hears Chuuya's breath stutter before he replies with, "I love you."

Still, as the days go by, Osaka feels like a dream more than a holiday. A long bittersweet dream. And just like that, as days of self-indulgent discovery blend into quiet nights, Dazai realizes it's the first time in a while that he used the word *dream* without a razor blade in his hand.

"It's not as spicy as I thought it would be."

Odasaku leans his cheek on his hand, a subtle smile crossing his lips. He's scooping up careful spoonfuls of extra spicy curry from the sides of the plate, mixing the egg and the rice and the roughly chopped onion in each and every bite. It's meticulous and somewhat expert. He has taken Dazai into a curry shop with lowlights and weirdly sticky floors inside a mall that overlooks the sea. The shop is nestled within a labyrinthian food hall just across the street from the Osaka Aquarium. Freedom Restaurant, it's called. The room is small and rather empty, and the glasses look old and scratched, but the curry warms his stomach and Dazai can't complain.

"That's because you asked for the mildest thing on their menu," Oda points out.

"I don't take risks~"

"How is it?"

"It's good; still spicy, but nothing I can't handle."

Oda chuckles. "I'm relieved you like it."

As Dazai smiles back at him and swallows some curry, he admits to himself that he needed a breather. He is having fun, truly — and he's learning to not feel guilty about it.

"I received an update about the situation with Fujiwara," Odasaku begins, careful enough for Dazai's interest to perk up. "It's not easy, and he'll be laid off from the University's rugby team. Hikaru's allegations are serious, and he wasn't the cleanest guy to begin with, so I am afraid that the damage to his reputation is done."

Dazai frowns. "What does Micchan say?"

"She feels responsible."

"That's ridiculous. It's not her fault."

"Not in the slightest, I agree," Oda says, with a slight bob of his head. He takes another spoonful of curry; meticulously, quietly. His voice roars in the semi-deserted restaurant as he calls for the waiter for an extra bottle of water, but his tone returns hushed as he carries on: "It's not her fault *at all.* But that's not what she thinks – and everything started out because she asked for your help, after all."

"Fujiwara hated me way before that," he says.

And Hikaru has been sick in the heart and mind for long before that, too, he adds to himself. He pleaded with Odasaku to avoid the topic of Hikaru and the dreams, conscious of how easily he might break down while he's just re-learning to walk with his head high, and his best friend is respecting his wish.

He can't talk about what happened and the things he's done. He doesn't *want* to talk about it. Part of him feels his hand has been forced, the other part calls him a coward for not owning up to his mess.

"Actually, I never quite understood that part."

He shrugs, taking a bite of curry. "Well— if we are being honest, here, Fujiwara hated me because I tried half as hard as him and still got twice the attention."

"Right."

"And I was messy, and I would argue it wasn't good attention—ah, you know I wasn't good. But I was never a hypocrite, and that always pissed him off. Bad guys get the girl, I guess."

"Bad guys get the boy."

Dazai smirks at the hushed remark. *Ah, yes,* he thinks, and his smile stretches and his heart races in his chest. "I'm one lucky bastard, right?"

"Chuuya seems like a good catch, yes."

"Isn't he?!" He beams, automatically leaning forward, voice setting fire at the mention of the redhead. "Isn't he perfect?"

"Well, surely I have never seen you quite this happy."

"I've never felt quite this happy," he replies. His voice gets heavier and lower and he focuses his gaze on the plate, fidgeting with the spoon. "I know it might sound like a lie, with what I have done. With the things I let happen." He can't mention the self-harming out loud, not when the memory of Chuuya's distrusting face hits him like a truck every time he remembers.

He's stopped ever since that conversation.

Not that he doesn't *want* anymore, of course. He does. Every time he

presses his eyelids together he has to rub the temptation of himself, ignoring it until it blends with his silence. But the online sessions with the therapist Mitsuru suggested are helping, and he doesn't want to see that face ever again.

He's quitting before Chuuya quits *him*.

It is far from painless, but it seemed like a simple enough choice.

"It doesn't sound like a lie," Oda answers, gently. "It sounds like you're being honest, in fact."

So Dazai takes a breath – deep, with his full lungs and all his heart. He jumps. He hopes the fall won't kill him, yet he knows for sure there are worse things than death. "Chuuya is the only thing that has been going right all along. When the world was turning darker around me, he was still there. He was still bright. And I'm afraid I lost him, on some days – that even without giving in to the dreams, I still lost Chuuya because of what I've done." His shoulders slump lightly. If he wanted to, Chuuya could go to Fyodor. It'd be a better choice, a safer one. "We've both been going through stuff."

"How are you?"

"Not good," Dazai answers without thinking. He says so before his brain can stop him, before he can even concoct a lie. He hunches over the plate and, as he inhales, he can almost smell the salty air from outside. "I'm not good, Odasaku. I haven't been good in a while."

Saying the words works like a magic spell breaking his chains, freeing him from the grip of the ice ghost fingers gripping his chest. Admitting his issues to someone who's not Chuuya eases his heart – because Odasaku may have his own life, but he's always been here for him.

Maybe, Dazai considers, his corner is less lonely and dark than Hikaru made him think it was.

"Hikaru, he—"

"I am closer to getting in touch with some family who might take him into custody," Odasaku stops him. "You don't have to worry. It's okay."

"Did they find him?"

“Not yet.”

“He doesn’t want to go back to KF,” Dazai whispers. “I understand that. I wouldn’t want to go back either.”

“It’s not your problem.”

“If he does something, I will never forgive myself.”

“He’s not your responsibility.” Oda pauses, and Dazai notices how his grip on the spoon hardens just so, and he wonders if he’s frustrating him with his inability to comprehend the human heart, and to let go of what is rotten and nurture what he has instead. “I’m proud of you for thinking that, and I understand where you’re coming from. I love you, but I will always worry about you. There have been nights when I thought I would wake up to a call from the ER, and a nurse would tell me you’d done something terrifying. And it kept me up at night, sometimes, it *did.* You feel responsible for your friends, of course. But you need to learn that they are their own people and, once you’ve done all you can, that’s enough. Isn’t it what they say about drowning? You can’t let somebody else drag you down with them.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Odasaku puts down the spoon, then, with a smile crossing his lips. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“I almost let him drown alone. He was trying to reach out, and I–”

“You are a good person.”

“I feel stupid.”

“Well,” Oda says, raising his glass. He smiles. “to stupid good people, then.”

—

As the bullet train pulls into Shin Yokohama station, the screeching brakes and the hum of the engine fill the air with a mechanical symphony. Passengers hurriedly disembark, creating a cacophony of shuffling feet and excited chatter that wraps Dazai as he moves his first steps into the platform and heads for the escalators. The station is bathed in the soft, artificial glow of overhead fluorescent lights, shrouding everything in a cool, pale hue.

Amidst the bustling chaos, Dazai's heart quickens, and his eyes scan the crowd. He works his way past the sea of people, each a unique blot of color in the rest of the monochromatic backdrop. The uniforms of train attendants stand out like sapphire beacons, and the overhead station signs flash with digital messages in vibrant red and green.

And then he sees him: *Chuuya*, waiting for him in a quiet spot of the station's main hall — his fiery hair loosely spilling over his shoulders and the all-black attire calling him in like a moth. He's mesmerized by the high-contrast flame amidst a sea of grays and blues and *boring*. The clinking of coins, footsteps echoing, and the distant murmur of announcements fade away as he pushes through the crowd, finding his way to Chuuya.

He thinks about dropping his bag to the ground to lift the redhead and make him spin, then decides against it. Chuuya's cheeks are already flushed, and his eyes sparkle with a mellow kind of amusement as he waits in a corner out of the crowd's way.

Dazai's heart skips a beat taking him in.

He stops in front of him and frames Chuuya's face in his hands, savoring the familiar warmth against his palms before leaning in to claim a kiss. They don't say anything, not *yet.* Their lips meet and the world halts, holding its breath as their souls reach for one another.

Dazai can't help but smile into the kiss. The station's noises seem to fade around them — further and further away, subsided by the maddened throb of his impatient heart. He can reach out and touch happiness again. And then Chuuya lets out a low *hm'm* and leans against his chest fully, wrapping his slender arms around Dazai's hips, and something in him *thaws*.

"Missed me, Mackerel?" He murmurs, the words tinged with playful arrogance.

"Terribly." Dazai's voice is laced with sweetness, like thick honey and flowery wine, and he means every word that leaves his mouth.

"H'm. Good."

"Odasaku had to stop me from jumping on a train home twice."

Chuuya pulls back just enough to look into his eyes, a smirk dancing on his kiss-plump lips.

“Well, aren’t you sweet?” he retorts, his voice affectionate, before pressing a dry kiss on the edge of Dazai’s jaw. “Missed you too.”

Smiling, Dazai basks in that admission. “I’m home now.”

“Welcome home,” Chuuya murmurs, cupping Dazai’s cheek as if he’s offering shelter to a butterfly. His touch flickers. “And you look really good, by the way.”

“I thought Chuuya liked me before.”

“I did— I *do.* But you look healthy.”

“It’s the curry detox. Two weeks of curry and I feel like I could move a mountain.”

“Incredible. The wonders of not surviving on taurine and fruit sandwiches, right?”

Dazai shrugs the teasing away. He leans in to kiss the heel of Chuuya’s hand and then his nose, and his lips, and all of a sudden he’s laughing and he doesn’t quite know why.

He has found healing in their time apart, but he hopes that being with Chuuya and the others in Yokohama will be a continuation of that process.

After another breathless moment, Chuuya breaks the kiss again, and now his tone holds a touch of genuine concern as he smooths the creases on Dazai’s shirt. “How are you, honestly? You’ve been away for a while.”

“I’m good.” His gaze holds Chuuya’s own, and he tries to sound as unwaveringly *sure* as the person he wants to become from today forward. “Well, maybe not good- *good* yet. I guess it’s all a work in progress, but I’m doing better.”

“Did you have fun?”

“I missed you,” Dazai says. “But, yes, I did.”

“How’s Odasaku?”

“He’s fine. We had a lot of time to talk, and he has been nothing but patient with me.”

There’s a hint of vulnerability in his voice and Chuuya nods. “Good;

that sounds good," he says, and lifts on his tiptoes to kiss Dazai's lips again. "Come on. Let's go home and get takeout — your pick."

"Chuuya spoils me."

Chuuya's hand finds Dazai's, their fingers intertwining, offering silent support. "I missed you, dumbass," he counters. "Let me spoil you a little – you've deserved it."

Dazai's lips curl into a fragile smile as they continue walking. The neon lights flicker overhead, casting intermittent shadows on their faces, suddenly reminding him that his feet are firmly planted on the ground.

He's in Yokohama.

He's home.

He *survived.*

It's a revelation that dawns on him in that very instant that being with Chuuya has a way of making everything feel right, even in the chaos of the world that keeps bustling around them. And nothing besides him matters anymore.

—

Like every Monday, the Old World is closed to the public — but that's not the kind of rule that applies to the Flags, of course. They reunite there anyway, hidden in plain sight behind a 'We're Closed' sign. Grand Council, Lippmann calls it. Town's Hall, Ice Man teases. The truth is that it feels like a family reunion.

Albatross is uncorking a beer and Mitsuru's giggle rings out in the bar's emptiness — her heart is in it, loud and genuine.

Dazai knows that sound well, as well as he knows himself.

It's a warm night, the kind of night when staying home alone feels like a waste, when the world opens like a wound under the prying gaze of a thousand stars.

The kind of night that calls for adventures, for change, even if Dazai is half-drunk and empty and not sure about what he's supposed to do anymore. He didn't want to come and play with others, but he didn't want to be the type of person who stays home and mulls over his lack

of social competence either.
He wanted to be the person Chuuya and Mitsuru and Odasaku all say he could be.

Now that he has dragged himself out and forced himself to act extroverted, he is drowning in still water. His head is spinning, and he reads through every interaction obsessively until he can't sense anything but hostility in the actions of others, and the alcohol isn't helping how he's feeling.

He feels overwhelmed but forces himself not to expose the fragility of his core, of his broken mind.

His heart might be in shambles, but his mask is not.

He can see the ghost of his actions etched on Chuuya's face – a damage he did not mean to inflict, and that he can't take back.

They are all sitting in a circle, chatting and laughing, and drinking beer from half-downed bottles of Asahi. Chuuya is grinning at something Doc said, bumping their bottles together in a toast. Mitsuru is perched on Lippmann's knees.

Dazai never felt quite so out of place in the bar before, but Micchan and Doc caught him by the arms and dragged him back inside when he tried to leave after one drink.

Then, when he thinks the night can't get any worse, *Albatross* happens. He suggests playing Spin the Bottle, wearing a big grin on his face and sunglasses despite the dim light of the bar. Of course, he would suggest playing something as dumb as spin the bottle.

For someone with an alley-cat personality like Dazai, the overexcited puppy energy exuded by Albatross is nothing short of kryptonite. It's annoying enough when 'Tross gets the zoomies and ends up roping the Flags into some weird adventure, but Dazai finds that he downright hates it when the man proposes stupid games.

Especially when Chuuya is involved and intoxicated; even more so if kissing is part of the rules.

But no one tells Albatross to shut up as the Flags gather around in a circle on the floor, leaving Dazai with no choice but to shut up and follow the group. As every time they play, there is always a tinge of hesitation at first.

It has been a few months since the last time they played anything truly spicy – before everything, before Hikaru – and Dazai can sense Chuuya's lingering stares; they feel close even with him sitting next to Mitsuru, a little away from the group, and Chuuya nestled between Doc and Albatross. '*Tross.* Dazai remembers how he and Chuuya kissed the last time they played a game.
And the thought of that happening *again* makes him want to throw up and die and curl up until the moment passes him over like a storm.

After a little coaxing, Mitsuru spins first. Doc. They smack a kiss on each other's mouths, and so goes the first round.

Next is Piano Man and Lippmann. They get whistled to get a room.

And Dazai's heart throbs, because it's Chuuya's turn and he hates his life already.

The bottle whirls around, bouncing and clicking on the floor, as Dazai licks his lips and begs internally that the spinning will never stop and the bottle will never land anywhere.

When it agonizingly comes to a halt, because it was just obvious it would, the dark green glass is pointing at Albatross. Chuuya laughs nervously as Lippmann cheers, shaking his head in denial. "Sorry, I'm not gonna do it."

"What? *Boo!"*

"Kiss him on the forehead," Lippmann suggests.

"Bite his ear."

"What? *Why?!"*

"It's fine," Albatross says. His lips curl up just so, and he winks at Dazai. "Just because I'm feeling so very magnanimous, Dazai can have this kiss. You two look like you need it."

Chuuya stiffens. He glances at him, blue irises enclosed through featherlight, long eyelashes. "Wouldn't that be cheating…?"

Lippmann, next to him, leans over to give him a nudge. "Come on, who cares? Go kiss your boyfriend instead. Be a little romantic for once, you *tsundere."*

"Romantic my ass," Chuuya growls, and it sounds like he doesn't want

to kiss him in front of everybody — which, frankly, Dazai can understand.

“Don’t force him,” Dazai says with what he *thinks* is a good-natured shrug, meaning for it to sound protective and open, yet fearing he didn’t quite manage to convey either. “Chuuya can kiss whoever he wants.”

He’s being a good sport, right? That’s the idea, at least. He knows Chuuya loves him, a dumb game won’t change it – and yet he remembers another night, so many months before, when he saw Chuuya kiss Albatross for the very same game and when Dazai hurt him because of a fake relationship scheme.

Why does he always feel like Chuuya is being dragged to somebody else?

Why does he keep pushing him away when all he wants is to be close, pressed tight into one another’s pain? Why is he still insecure when Chuuya has done nothing but show him to the light?

His good-sport-comment sounds a little more petulant than Dazai expected, though. *You failed.* He flashes a glance around the circle, his heart thudding in his chest as he realizes no one is moving, everyone is staring. Mitsuru blinks, lips parted in an o.

“Osamu,” she murmurs, “are you uncomfortable?”

“I understand peer pressure, but you *can* say it if you’re uncomfortable,” Piano Man adds, leaning into the opening created by Mitsuru’s words with a friendliness that makes Dazai shiver.

“Well, no, but—“

“Dude. *For real,* ya look like a zombie.*”*

A flush creeps up his neck, waking every single hair up his arms and nape, as he notices that Chuuya is looking with a tinge of expectation. And then it hits him: *fuck no, his boyfriend can’t kiss whoever he pleases.* “I mean, I don’t want to spoil the fun since everyone else is okay with it.”

“So I can kiss whoever I want, huh,” Chuuya echoes, scowling. He’s slurring his words, half drunk and half annoyed.

Dazai glances back with a small smile. Habit kicking in — the banter

flowing naturally out of his lips. “As long as they are ready to fight me, that is.”

“Ah.”

“I thought I made that clear,” he says.

“But you don’t want me to kiss you, right now,” Chuuya points out, and Dazai feels a pang in his chest and the weight of the stares pinning him down.

“I always want you. Maybe I’m not in the mood for a game after all. I’ve been on edge and *ehh* all night,” he allows, in a quiet voice and shrugging as if *that* gesture alone can explain what ‘ehh’ means when he doesn’t even know how to word it. The explanation sounds reasonable to him, at least, considering the amount of drama they have been going through.
His skin may be healing, but his mind will take much longer.

But Chuuya walks to him and plummets on his lap, minding little about everything else. He leans in, breath fanning over Dazai’s cheek as a grin from ear to ear cuts his face.

He should have known that he couldn’t lose against Chuuya.

“Let me help,” Chuuya says.

“Chuuya, you’re drunk.”

“Yes,” he says. Even then, he sounds fully sober. “Yes, I guess I am.”

“Just have fun and let me be, okay? I’m fine.”

“Osamu,” Chuuya interrupts him. His voice cracks, but his hands remain determined as he wraps them around Dazai’s jaw to guide his face. Their gazes meet and he halts, frozen under the touch. “It’s still us, alright? And it’s fine if you want to bow out of a stupid fuckin’ game. We’ll take the bow, but we’ll take it together. So don’t think you can talk for me and for what *you* think I want to do.”

Now. Dazai agrees he has no jurisdiction over Chuuya’s decisions, and it should not feel like a trap or like he’s falling off the edge of what’s acceptable and what’s not. He needs to warn the badge of the proper boyfriend. And this is just a game, it shouldn’t be that deep. But their relationship is so damn real, and he feels it slipping through his fingers with every bit of miscommunication as they keep getting

scratched in one another's edges.

"It's just a dumb game, and you don't have to play. We can bow out."

"Not a chance in hell," Chuuya answers. He pushes their foreheads together, and Dazai's breath catches in his throat. "Unless you want to bow out — tell me you're not comfortable, and I'll back out right now. Tell me, and I'll listen. But don't go around saying you are doing it just for my sake." His voice dips. "A kiss wouldn't be so bad, you know? I missed you tonight."

"I missed you too," he admits.

"We haven't talked much."

"No, we haven't."

"I was worried you'd be annoyed or some shit," Chuuya says.

Halfheartedly, Dazai nods. Part of him understands where that insecurity stems from, but he doesn't need to look at Chuuya's face too closely to recognize the reason why he sounds so strained — a want so deep and obvious that Dazai can feel the sting of it on his skin, awakening the hair on the back of his neck.

He swallows, licking his bottom lip. "I'm not. Honestly, if Chuuya wanted a kiss that badly all he had to do was ask."

"I felt like you were distant. I don't know."

I'm not distant with you, but I'm mad at myself for still not being the person I could be. But he doesn't say it. Instead, he tilts his head.

"You know," Chuuya continues, his touch like molten chocolate over his nervous skin. He's always been nervy, caught in a tension he can't dissipate, but Chuuya soothes him. "You annoy me so much. Do you have a vague idea of how many times I wanted to steal you away and kiss you, you stupid, big, silly idiot?"

Chuuya's drowsy lilt kicks his senses into overdrive — and then the redhead pushes closer, and Dazai swallows.

"No," he admits, not untruly.

"Many, many, many, many—" Chuuya adjusts on his lap. "*Many* times."

“Guys,” Albatross calls, waving a hand to attract their attention. “This premise is unnecessary.”

“Shut up, ‘Tross,” Chuuya growls. He smiles. “You said I was allowed to kiss him, right?” He pushes his lips closer to Dazai’s, a millimeter away from the other’s mouth, gripping his collar in his fist. His pale eyes gleam — a smile tugging his lips that says *You, Me, Now.* “Let’s see if this mackerel turns into a prince.”

That same night, many hours later, Dazai is lying in Chuuya’s bed — an old teddy bear’s beady eyes looking over them and the scent of each other still lingering on their bodies. Silver moonlight bathes the room, and Chuuya’s hair looks like blood-tinged ink spread on Dazai’s bandaged chest.

Chuuya’s cheek is warm against his heartbeat.

Every time he looks at him, Dazai is reminded that he has learned the outlines of love on the curves of Chuuya’s body. That every fight is stupid, that he wants him more than anything.

He had to drag Chuuya home before things got too heated in public, and he doesn’t regret it one bit.

“Oi, Dazai,” Chuuya says, speaking cautiously into the thick darkness of their bedroom. “You stole my first kiss. Do you remember?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say *steal.”*

Chuuya groans, somehow bratty. “You kissed me first, though.”

“Yes, I did. You don’t have to remind me.”

“It was a present, and it was my birthday.”

“Huh, I guess…? What is Chuuya even getting at?”

But Chuuya doesn’t listen to him. He pouts, bottom lip jutting out. “Then be a man and take responsibility.” He pauses, eyes glittering and bloodshot because of the alcohol. “Take all my future kisses, too. Kiss me forever— only me, not other people you like. Not Micchan. Not Hikaru, wherever the fuck he is. Only *me*.” A pause, and Dazai would laugh and ask why on earth he should do that if Chuuya didn’t look quite so sober all of a sudden. Then, the only tale-telling sign of

his intoxication is the gleam in his eyes.

“Kiss me until we are old and gray, and it’ll be gross and disgusting because we’ll not have teeth anymore and there’ll be a lot of spit and maybe even some snot—“

“Ew?!”

“—and you won’t think that kissing me is that great anymore, but kiss me anyway. Because you claimed that first one, yeah? So now all my kisses are yours.” His scowl deepens, his cheeks pink and his nose bright red because of the wine. “You cursed me, ‘Samu. A shitty curse, and now I can only ever fall in love with you, no matter what I do — no matter how many lives we’ll live and how many times I’ll be reborn, it’s always you. So you’ve got to take responsibility.”

Take responsibility.

Chuckling to himself, Dazai ponders that it almost sounds like a marriage proposal. He lets Chuuya trace doodles on his skin with his finger.

“Chuuya better be prepared, then,” he says, wrapping Chuuya’s cheeks in his hands and driving him close until their foreheads brush together. “Because I’ll take *all* those kisses.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll kiss you for the rest of my life, and all our next lives too. I promise.”

I’ll kiss you now, and tomorrow, and forever more. I will kiss you, and only you; I promise. I swear.

—

One of the last memories Dazai has of his childhood with Chuuya is breaking into the villa down the road to Fyodor’s house – the one that has been on sale forever, and that Mori says will never be sold.

People say it’s haunted, and that someone died there.

To Dazai, it just feels quite sad to stand still in the same place for years waiting for something that will never happen. ‘Well, it’s because no one sane would want it,’ Mori explained, and those words carved themselves inside Dazai’s marrow.

They feel oddly personal as if he is an abandoned house waiting and no one with half a brain cell will ever remove the ‘for sale, family wanted’ sign hanging around his neck.

That’s why it’s so easy for Chuuya to convince him to break into the house one autumn day. The crisp leaves cover the streets with a rug of crunchy gold and brown, and the sun is still pleasant enough to stay outside.
Chuuya is bored, and Dazai needs to check for himself if the house is truly that unlovable.

Dazai leads the way into the garden, sneaking past a hole in the grate. His expertise tells Dazai it’s not the first time he breaks in, and his curiosity mixes with a tinge of trepidation. He scurries behind his friend, throwing glances behind his shoulder.

“Kajii dared me to enter the garden before,” Chuuya explains in a hushed voice, even if Dazai has asked nothing. “But never the house.”

The old place has always seemed intriguing from the outside, with its weathered facade and overgrown garden.

As soon as they enter from a window, eerie darkness envelops them – the sunlight filtering in from scattered, narrow openings from the windows that have been sealed shut with heavy wooden boards. Chuuya turns on the torch, and a strip of light illuminates the darkness.

Now that they’re inside, the creaking floors and eerie shadows feel a little more unsettling.

Dazai suddenly stops in his tracks, his wide eyes fixed on a particularly dim corner of the room – and the words echo and blend in his mind, telling him that the house might be haunted after all.

“Who do you think lived here?”

“Sorcerers,” Chuuya answers without hesitation. “An old family of sorcerers who turned their enemies into zombies.”

Dazai’s pulse quickens in his wrist. “Zombies aren’t a thing.”

“Bo-ooo-ring. Just imagine if they were, okay?” Chuuya asks, turning abruptly and pointing the torch at Dazai’s face – and immediately lowering it when the brunet steps away from the light with a frown. “*Shit.*”

“You shouldn’t say that word.”

Chuuya shrugs the comment away. “Micchan says it all the time.”

Dazai is about to point out that Mitsuru is also not exactly supposed to use curse words when a loud crack coming from the belly of the house, like a giant slowly coming alive, stops him. *The zombies*, he thinks.
Which is stupid because zombies are not real, so there is no reason for this fear to be.

He hesitates, his little heart racing as Chuuya offers him a cocky smile. He extends his hand to Dazai and says, “If you are scared of zombies eating your brain, just hold my hand.”

For a long moment, Dazai looks at his best friend’s hand. His open palm is inviting in the darkness, and his grip on the torch remains solid.

He’s not afraid, Chuuya. He’s never afraid of anything and, somehow, that reassures Dazai that everything will be okay even if he doesn’t have *everything* under control.

“I am not scared,” Dazai points out, even though he steps forward and holds onto the fingers Chuuya is offering him. “Not of zombies and *surely* not of the dark.”

“Surely not,” Chuuya mumbles.

With their fingers intertwined, they gather the courage to walk down a broad corridor and continue their exploration of the abandoned house. The dusty air is thick with the scent of forgotten memories, and the voice of the walls and floor echoes with laughter from long ago. The wooden floorboards beneath their sneakers creak with each cautious step they take, but every time Dazai fears he might be flinching too violently Chuuya squeezes his hand and presses himself against his side.

A broken window allows a sliver of daylight to filter in, illuminating the dusty motes that dance in the air.

Still holding Dazai’s hand, Chuuya points the torch in front of him. “Ya know,” he mumbles, “if we meet a zombie, I’ll kick them.”

“A zombie is stronger than you. You’re a kid.”

“I’m a *knight*,” Chuuya corrects him.

“Huh, aren’t there requirements for knights? Like not being short.”

Chuuya scoffs. “Look, this is a game and I am a knight, okay?”

“...Can I be a knight too, then?”

Chuuya barks a little laugh, but another creak stops him again. With his heart fluttering in his throat, Dazai follows him as the redhead guides him deeper into the bowels of the old house and into what looks like an old bedroom – deeper into the adventure that Chuuya has magicked out of nowhere, somewhat of a sorcerer himself. At least, Dazai thinks his best friend could be a little magical, being so brave in such a place. A real-life knight.

The air is cold as the intermittent gusts of wind play tricks on his imagination. Dust motes dance in the narrow beams of light filtering through cracked windows and in the paths of light created by the torch.

The old wallpaper peels from the walls, and dusty, forgotten furniture lies covered in white sheets. It’s as if time itself has forgotten this place.

Despite his apprehension, Dazai’s curiosity battles his fear. He’s clutching Chuuya’s hand with a firm grip, but he can’t help the whistling whisper that escapes his lips.

“Ne, Chuuya,” he murmurs, his voice trembling with a mix of excitement and fear. “We’re good knights, right? Like, trained and all.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“What if the zombies are real? What if they make people disappear?”

“Then we fight.”

“Together?”

“Together,” Chuuya murmurs. His grip is steady around his hand even as he glances at Dazai with a reassuring smile, and a thousand butterflies take flight in his belly. “Look– this is the bedroom, yeah? Here, the lord and lady sorcerers started their army of monsters. And they ate human flesh, too.” A shiver runs down Dazai’s spine, but he

doesn't stop Chuuya's narration and doesn't let go of his hand. He follows deeper into the room, senses alert, wincing at the world Chuuya is building for them. "Are you still scared, 'Samu?"

"Absolutely not."

"Bet you are too scared to jump on the bed," Chuuya says, and Dazai's heart leaps.

"What? I— I *can* jump on the bed! No problem."

When Chuuya beams at him, the entire room gets lit up. As they proceed further and make their way around the bed, still bickering about who is brave enough to jump on it, Dazai's eyes dart around.

Half of him is searching for any signs of monsters awoken from their slumber by the ruckus; the other half is holding onto the objective knowledge that zombies are most surely not real. Mori told him so. He'd call him dumb if he knew Dazai has believed in monsters even for a second. He'd say he's better than this 'childish idiocy'.

"'Samu?" Chuuya calls.

Dazai tilts his head. "Yes?"

"One day I'll buy us a house," he promises, his serious expression almost concealed by the semi-darkness of the torch. Which is a weird promise, because Dazai doesn't need a house at all; he has one. But, for some reason, as they switch out of the world of sorcerers and zombies and knights and return to reality, the idea of him and Chuuya living in the same house feels like going on an adventure.

"This house?"

"Well… no, a house without sorcerers and zombies." Dazai definitely can't say he's wrong, because he would not want a house haunted by zombies either. "But a house this big."

"Just for us?"

"Just for us."

"That'd be nice," Dazai hears himself murmuring.

A house just for them.

The promise of adventure and discovery urges them forward, deeper

into the house and further away from the light; the kitchen with its empty shelves, the studio and its sheet-covered furniture. They run away before venturing onto the second floor, too scared by the way the stairs scream under their weight.

About that day, Dazai would go on to remember timeworn walls and Chuuya's hand: his breathing pattern, his giggles, and the adrenaline of two knight-survivors who defeated zombies and sorcerers.

Maybe, the abandoned house is not so bad. Maybe Mori is wrong, and it's not true that no one will ever want it: because it might be ruined and dusty and dark, but the old rooms hide forgotten treasures and mysteries begging to be explored.

But, as he grows up, Dazai learns that there *are* houses no one wants. Some people wait and wait and wait, sitting around in the hope of being seen and saved. The more they sit around, the more invisible they become.

Hikaru is one of those people: abandoned houses that are past their expiration date, so deeply covered in dust and darkness that they can't be recovered anymore. Souls up for demolition.

"I didn't think you'd go as far as meeting me without telling you precious Chuuya."

"You called," Dazai answers.

Hikaru smiles and does not explain. Not immediately, at least.

The thing is, Dazai would have been fine with never hearing from Hikaru ever again.

His friendship with so many people just died of neglect, so why can't Hikaru do the same? Why can't they just forget about one another, letting their acquaintance slip into nothing?

But the thing must be: it takes two to neglect a relationship. Hikaru keeps feeding it, showing up, reaching out. He's holding onto Dazai as a drowning man holds onto his last breath — and so they keep drowning together, gasping, drinking salt water that tastes like acid.

That is exactly why Dazai is standing against the wall next to the vending machines of Yokohama station, on the wind-swept platform, arms crossed against the soft fabric of his grey sweater. Even though his head is bent slightly downward, he's stealing glances at Hikaru

from under the shade of his purple baseball cap. Part of him feels like he's hiding under the hat. It's not a fashion statement, it's an act of cowardice.

Hikaru, on the contrary, remains the same despite the things that have changed. Almost in *spite* of them. Unearthed, but not ashamed; he rips himself open in front of a crowd and accepts their judgment. Even under the cold sunlight, the boy looks like a fever dream — pale skin, flushed cheeks, a pristine uniform of a private school he stopped attending months before, according to Odasaku. Too beautiful to be real, too raw to be human.

He looks like a god out of control.

And yet, his eyes — lucid enough to let Dazai wonder if he's drugged — harbor a devoted kindness when he looks at him that Dazai can't place nor understand.

"I needed to talk to you," Hikaru says.

"In a *station.*"

"This is kind of my place, now."

Dazai lets out a low hum and takes the information in as he notices a couple of students hurrying up the stairs two by two. Everyone who passes by ignores them, and Dazai has spent his life thinking he enjoys being ignored, but he doesn't like whatever is going on there.
As if he's not alive at all, something else in the fabric of a ruined society.

He never asked himself where Hikaru was staying – was it a hotel or a couch or an internet cafe, was it a park? Was it nowhere? All of a sudden, it seemed obvious that he never asked the right questions.
"Then say what you wanted to say. You wanted to talk, right?"

"Not like this." His voice wavers, and Hikaru fidgets with the long sleeves of his shirt. "I don't like it when we talk like this — like you're cross with me."

"I have reasons to be mad at you."

"Chuuya sought me out first."

It's an insinuation to end all insinuations. Dazai frowns, the wind whistling into his eardrums as a train rushes in the railways past

them. “Chuuya was worried for me,” he says, and hates how it sounds like an excuse.

“I bet he was,” Hikaru murmurs. His lips twitch up. “Chuuya said you don’t love me.”

“Chuuya’s right. I don’t love you right now.”

He sees something wilt in Hikaru as if the boy is blending with the station and disappearing with its mutable crowd. Something always present, but never stable. The boy’s shoulders hunch, as if he expected a different answer.

“You don’t love me?”

“Not if you behave like this,” Dazai amends, in a gentler tone. Although he tries to shrug it away, a stone weighs on his chest. “You’ve been horrible to both my boyfriend and I. You’ve tried to jeopardize my life in any way you can. *How* can I love you?”

“I thought we were friends.”

“Me too, but friends don’t destroy each other.”

“I just didn’t want you to leave me behind.”

Dazai shakes his head. “I had no intention of stopping being your friend until you went for Chuuya.”

“Chuuya doesn’t love you like I do.”

“Frankly? No. I hope he doesn’t.”

“You don’t love me.” It seems hazed, as if Hikaru is rolling the words on the tip of his tongue and just realized they border on disgusting. Chewy, bitter words. “Do you love Chuuya more than me?”

For a moment, Dazai considers denying it.

No, he doesn’t, because the love he harbors for his friends and the adoration for Chuuya are wildly different shades of the same emotion. He loves Chuuya, and that’s not something he can compare to any other friendship. He loves Chuuya differently, in a once-in-a-lifetime way.
But he can’t choose between friends and boyfriend, and his love for his boyfriend doesn’t mean he’s suddenly willing to abandon a friend in need.

He almost allowed himself to relapse to keep Hikaru company in the stifling dark cage he had built for himself – isn't that love, too? Stupid love. Blind, foolish love. The love of an old friend. A love that is pure and young and stupid.

But he also knows that Hikaru will take advantage of everything he says now.

"You know I do."

"Is that why you won't be with me?"

Dazai shudders. A metallic voice announces a train in two minutes to the semi-deserted platform. "Among other things, yes."

"What would you do if Chuuya died?"

His stomach churns. "Don't touch him."

"Don't be ridiculous," the boy says, resignation painted on his handsome traits. "I would never hurt him; not physically, I'm not stupid. And I wouldn't do it because it would mean hurting you. Never *you*. You are my precious friend and, deep down, I suppose I knew I was letting you down. So I wanted you to know."

"Know what?"

"That I love you," he murmurs. "And that it doesn't matter what I do, that's always true."

Dazai pales, all the color drained from his cheeks. "I think you've done enough."

His voice is shaky, but Hikaru's smile doesn't budge. His eyes are red-rimmed. His hands are quivering. As time ticks away, he looks more frail, like a doll made of glass; like a person about to disappear. Dazai shivers, as recognition ripples through him: what he's seeing is a man who's drowning, and that he can't help.

It falls as an ice-cold sense of recognition rises — because there's no escape, no way out unless *Hikaru* wants to find it.

There's nowhere Dazai can go to help but back; back to hell, right where Hikaru has made himself a home.

"That's okay. I still love you." He smiles under the fading sky — eyes closed, eyelashes trembling. His soul is in it, and it's clear his body is

dying. It's then that Dazai realizes he was already out of time from the moment he met Hikaru. "So I also wanted to know if you'd cry for me like you'd cry for your Chuuya."

The loud voice announcing a new train fills his ears. It awakens a new urgency in him. A desperation that pulls at his muscles. "Please," he says, trying to buy more time. "Let me help."

"You will never understand, won't you?"

Dazai doesn't answer, feeling like he's trying to flail his way out of the water instead of swimming. As if he's tied and fallen and sinking. "No," he finally murmurs, "but I can try to understand if you talk to me."

"But, see, there is no point: you will never be mine, and you have forgotten what it feels like to dream. We do not speak the same language anymore. You'll never want me, and I don't want you to pity me, 'Samu; I honestly don't. Because even if you don't love me yet, it doesn't mean that *I* haven't loved you all along."

"I do care — just not like you want me to."

Why is that not enough?

Why does he have to die to prove himself — and when did dying become so unpleasant?

Hikaru plays with his fingers, looking down at them for the longest moment. "That's okay. Thank you for being my friend anyway."

"I never asked you where you came from or why you came to Yokohama."

"I come from nowhere."

"That can't be true."

"It *is* true, but I came here for you," he says softly. "And if you don't want me, I have no reason to stay."

"Where will you go?"

"We'll see," Hikaru says.

"Stay. I mean it."

“I have nothing that keeps me here, ‘Samu.”

You have something that could be good, you have people who could forgive you. “You have a friend.”

“Do I?” Hikaru answers, and his voice is hollow and Dazai just knows that it’s done; they’re done. *He lost.*

That’s when Hikaru pulls away from the wall and leaves, sinking into the sea of people before Dazai can stop him.

Drowning in the crowd, running in between the people and dissolving in the liquid mash of commuters just as they always fantasized about drowning in the ocean with the waves opening for them, engulfing their mortal coils and freeing them from this inability to reach for life, for pleasure. Their suffering was always older than their bodies.

And Dazai sees it now — he sees himself, and the person he could have been if he’d given in to Hikaru’s teasing.

Who he could have been if he’d been alone, and if he had not managed to pull himself out of this spiral of self-hatred and ache: someone whose pain spills all over, untethered and out of control and too scared to lose happiness to ever give it a chance. He sees the darkest side of himself waving him goodbye, smiling wistfully, dressed in the white clothes of the Kokiden Foundation.

Dazai blinks, and he’s gone.

Hikaru disappears and takes that old Dazai Osamu with him, holding the hand of a phantom possibility that never became real. He removes the temptation, the memories, the *ifs*.

The pain remains, though. That’s resilient, that’s forever.

As Dazai tries to call after the boy, hoping that he can somehow get a hold of that part of himself that will slowly rot with Hikaru, all he sees are the backs of the people swarming toward the platform.

A part of him feels relieved that Hikaru won’t be found — that he won’t have to worry about being dragged back to the place that hurt them so much, to a hole that transforms children into ghosts and dreams into dirt. It’s a selfish, silly part of him that speaks in the hushed voice of a younger Dazai.

Then the doors close, and the train departs.

Soon, the voice croaks from the speakers, *the JR Negishi Line train to Ofuna will arrive at Platform Three. It will stop at Sakuragicho, Kannai, Ishikawacho…*

And that's all Dazai hears for a long time.

Epilogue

One year later, Yokohama

More than a year has passed since that day.

Dazai Osamu is an adult and he always knew that, eventually, things would change. Life is ever-changing, never-static.

Maybe he didn't quite appreciate it when he was queuing for meds three times a day at the Kokiden Foundation, or when he almost lost his best friend to a stupid game, or when he kissed him in an empty room. He didn't quite appreciate how fast life and love moved when he found Chuuya and vouched to never let him go again — or when Chuuya lost his father and Dazai almost lost himself.

Therapy is helping.

Thanks to it, Dazai has realized that life is made of changes that he can either embrace or fight. He doesn't have to *succumb,* he's not weak, and life evolves at the frenetic rhythm of a heartbeat. Things are always bound to change, at some point. Now it's that point. They're watching some drama on the TV nestled under the kotatsu in their living room, hunting for warmth and occasionally checking the comments on Chuuya's *'Swatching 100 Years of Blushes'* new viral video, when Dazai changes the direction of their lives again.

"I have been offered a research project between Tohoku, Waseda and Osaka University," he says. "They're giving me a full-time teaching position at Tohoku, too."

He doesn't know why he broke the news to Chuuya like that — like it's not something that will inevitably shake up their lives.

Blue eyes widen and his lips part in surprise, and Dazai's stomach drops. He doesn't miss the subtle way the thin wrinkle on Chuuya's forehead hardens.

“Ah,” he says.

“It’s… a recent development.”

The other’s lips curl up in a smile and Dazai’s chest crinkles up like an old towel. “It’s great,” he corrects him gently. “It’s great, ‘Samu.”

Chuuya is not good with masks, he never was, so Dazai can see all the thousand clashing reactions under the surface of that smile.
He can see the surprise, the ache. And he can see the honest spark of happiness, too, and it hurts all the more.

He’ll move to a whole other city (hell, going to Sendai might as well be a whole other world) if he accepts the teaching position that Tohoku University has offered him: he’s not born for the questionable thrill of the commute, especially if it involves a daily Shinkansen trip, and the working hours would force him to relocate.

He hates the idea, but if he accepts he’ll have to say goodbye to Odasaku and Mitsuru.

Bye, Yokohama, welcome a new life with people he doesn’t know.

Bye, late-night games at the Old World.

Bye, Chuuya.

Because Chuuya has his life in Yokohama, with his fashion gigs and his job for D.O.A. — a job that he adores — and he can’t follow him. He *won’t* follow him.

Dazai swallows dry, trying to adjust the aim of his announcement, making it less sharp while knowing damn well it’s too late to coddle Chuuya’s feelings.

“I mean, it’s not like I already bought train tickets and all, but like I said the research comes with a teaching position within the university, too. It’s the top-ranked university in Japan and Odasaku said they only accept one candidate every hundred years. I got excited, but that doesn’t mean…”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Chuuya interrupts him. The tone is harsh enough to make him flinch, his shoulders slouching.

“Nothing is decided.”

“You’d be a fool not to accept. You *want* to accept.”

Oh, he does; he wants this vacancy more than anything else in the world. Still, he closes into his shoulders with the distinct feeling of having said the wrong thing.

“I do, yes,” he says, a tinge of defensiveness seeping into his tone.

“Good, because you deserve a win, ‘Samu; it’s karmic retribution for suffering all your life because of that brain of yours.” Chuuya’s smile doesn’t falter, but his voice does — just a little, halfway between broken because of the emotion and because they are facing yet another trial. “A teaching position? Fuck. That’s insane.”

“Odasaku says I’d be the youngest ever.”

“Youngest teacher in the history of Tohoku? It has a ring to it.”

“It does, right~?”

“Look at you, being offered a cool research project like the genius you are.” Dazai’s heart hiccups as Chuuya hooks a hand into the collar of his shirt and drags him in for a quick peck on the tip of his nose. “Congratulations, you smart boy. You deserve it.”

“Well, if Chibi calls me smart like *that*—“

“I’ll call you everything you want while I give you your reward,” Chuuya purrs.

The sultry invitation and the brazen *desire* in his tone make Dazai shiver and retract just so, reminding him of the changes ahead.

“I didn’t mean to let you know like this,” he says.

“It’s alright, I swear. I’m just surprised, but I am happy for you,” Chuuya insists. “I really am.”

Surprised is a way of putting it, for sure, because he knows Chuuya enough to realize he’d swallow his tongue before he rains on Dazai’s parade by bringing up the possibility of splitting up. It *is* a possibility, of course. It's reasonable.

His boyfriend is supportive of his achievements, they both are: whenever Fyodor is in town, Dazai swallows the ‘*you banged my boyfriend’* bundle of insults that tightens his throat and focuses on the bright present Chuuya is building for himself — and a future that involves Fyodor, somehow, and that’s okay.

But he also knows that Chuuya suffers loneliness more than anything else. He knows the redhead needs someone who will remind him that he's strong, from time to time, and that he's gorgeous and worthy of love. Not that Dazai is a self-confident dreamboat, of course, especially when he's left alone.

He needs Chuuya, too.

They both suck at a lot of things, but Dazai has learned that those flaws bother him less when they are together.

So what's left to do when you're in love and young, and you have finally found your soulmate? You're in for the long run. You run and you run even if it goes nowhere. And, when you run into adulthood, the crash happens at full speed.

"Look, it's just Miyagi," Dazai insists, reaching out for Chuuya's hands above the kotatsu, and he's not sure if he's trying to convince his boyfriend or himself. "It's just three hours away — four if I buy a car. We are going to make this work."

"I know. It's not that far away." Chuuya's lips stretch and he squeezes Dazai's hand. "We'll find a way and we're not gonna go no-contact. We're not dumb anymore."

"We can have Skype dates."

"And I can come visit."

"I can come back on Friday and leave on Monday morning."

Come with me, a part of Dazai screams — he knows it would be unfair to ask, but he wishes for it nonetheless. *Tell me we don't have to be apart again; that they can still be together.*

But no matter how much he wishes for it, Chuuya shakes his head with a soft smile and doesn't say anything. For the longest time, they still hold hands while no one speaks. The drama continues on the screen, unraveling in front of his eyes even though Dazai is not following.
All he can think about is his life here; Chuuya is still holding his hand, and it feels like he will never let go.

He wants to accept this job.

He wants to make it work.

He *wants*—

“Come with me,” he blurts out.

Chuuya raises his head as if the question pinched him. “Hah? Where?”

Here it goes, Dazai thinks. This right here is the point in his life where he can’t back down: it’s now or never.

“Miyagi,” he says. “Come to Sendai with me.”

He sees Chuuya’s eyes grow wide. His jaw not-so-metaphorically falls as he clocks in with Dazai’s proposal.

“What…?”

“I never asked before, and I’m not sure it’s fair to even suggest you leave your home and your sister and all your friends, but I *have* to.”

“Dazai,” Chuuya says, oh so *slowly*, “it would be complicated.”

“We’ll have some time to adjust. We can be long-distance for a while, but maybe think about it?”

“Well — I can talk to Sigma.”

“If you want you can join me in a couple of months, once you have sorted out your things; you can come with me whenever *you* want, and I’ll always have space for you.”

Chuuya hesitates. “Right,” he murmurs.

“Of course, before that, I’ll see if I can work between Miyagi and Yokohama. Let’s have two homes. It’ll be expensive but it’s not impossible.”

He looks at Chuuya looking for hope, and his heart halts when the other does not answer. He waits for an encouragement that never comes. Maybe he should just shut up and back up, declare that he’s joking or something. Maybe he’s grasping at straws and they were serious but not *that* serious, and maybe it was never a good idea to begin with.

And it’s odd because he always thought he would find a ratty apartment to drink himself nearly to death, but he doesn’t want that anymore.

“We could,” Chuuya hums, touching his thumb to his bottom lip. “I can travel back to Yokohama for the shoots and the bigger campaigns.”

“I know it’s a lot, but I don’t want to leave without asking you to come with me. And I will refuse this job if it means losing you.”

“Dazai, seriously, don’t even think about it.”

“I’m just saying.”

“It’s fucking Tohoku!”

“And it’s not worth losing you.”

“Realistically, I *could* relocate. Let’s see if it works, yeah?”

He swallows, reaching for Chuuya’s hands again from across the kotatsu. He expects the redhead to escape his touch but he doesn’t, opening for it like a flower blooming in spring. “Look, I don’t want to get in the way of your life, and I don’t want to force you to move, but I also want to be together. So if you want, if you will have me… maybe we can be together, and apply for the partnership oath system before I leave. Most prefectures accept that kind of certificate, so we could present it as we look for a second house. I know it’s not a big ceremony or anything, but what I mean—” He hesitates and takes a deep breath. Now or never. “I guess what I mean is: marry me, Chuuya.”

Or the next best option, that is.

But it doesn’t even matter because he’s rambling, at this point, words running out of his control. The civil same-sex partnership contract is not even an actual marriage certificate, but it’s what they can get if they want to stay in the country. They can always move to Paris and marry for real, one day. The point is that Dazai’s brain is freewheeling, and it’s as terrifying as it’s freeing.

At least he can’t say he didn’t try.

But the silence that answers him is deafening, and he can’t read Chuuya’s expression as his heart rushes in his eardrums.

Then, after what feels like an eternity, Chuuya opens his mouth. He closes it with a strangled sound.

Dazai waits.

And waits.

And waits.

When the redhead finally moves, Dazai's soul almost jumps out of his skin.

Without a single word, Chuuya gets on his feet, lips pulled in a tight line, and leaves.

He *leaves.*

He stands up and walks toward the door to the kitchen without a word, neck stiff and shoulders trembling, mindless of the fact that Dazai is still gawking at him. *What the hell,* is all Dazai can think, his eyes glued to the redhead's back as it disappears into the kitchen.

It's a second, though, because then Chuuya comes back — eyes lucid, cheeks beet red and glossy. It pulls out his freckles.

"How dare you?" He cries out, pointing a finger at Dazai with a strangled voice — like he's on the verge of crying. "You— *you,* asking stuff like *that* without warning."

This time, as Dazai senses the smile crossing his lips, unguarded, he doesn't try to conceal or stop it. He embraces the burning sense of relief that comes with it, letting its warmth bloom under his skin as he opens his arms to welcome Chuuya, who bullets himself in his embrace.

"I really hate you," Chuuya growls, under his breath. It's without bite: it carries a thousand ways to say *I love you* and Dazai hears them all.

"H'm, I'm sure you do."

"So we're gonna go to the neighborhood's office tomorrow? *Now?* What about now, actually? I'm pretty sure they're open 24/7."

Dazai giggles under his breath, delighted and light-headed and only half realizing that they might elope. For real. They could, and they will, and they are *going to.* "Is Chibi that impatient?"

"Fuck yes. We've teased everyone for our entire lives, so no time like the present."

“Don’t you want to at least tell your sister?”

“Nah. If you’re in, if you *mean* it, I’m in; let’s do it.”

“Even now?”

“Even now.”

“So is that a yes?”

“Might be. I forgot the question,” Chuuya mumbles sotto-voce, with a rumble that sounds halfway between a chuckle and a cat’s purring, and that fades into the crook of Dazai’s neck.

It is fair enough, Dazai supposes.

He’ll repeat those words as many times as his boyfriend wants and, this time, he’s shaving off some of the stiffness from his initial proposal. In the loaded silence, Chuuya melts in his arms as a blinding sense of expectation simmers in the room, grasping the back of Dazai's shirt with trembling fingers. Demanding nails sink into the fabric, almost reaching the bandages, strong enough that he can sense them on his skin through the bandages.

“You, Nakahara Chuuya, are my best friend and my twin soul.” He touches warm lips against Chuuya’s ear shell just next to the Baki tattoo — soft, *softer*. “Be mine forever?”

And it may be just one question at the end of the road, one question that ends the years of longing and promises.

The answer to that childish oath exchanged between children, a long time before. A word Dazai had always dreamed about, beyond the iron bars of the Kokiden Foundation.

A promise, and the promise of a *future*.

A future that he can see in the blue of Chuuya’s eyes, in the sun of his voice and the moon of his smile.

“ I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter End Notes

First of all, thank you for reading until the end!
If you've reached this point, I really, really, really hope you've enjoyed the ride and the story. Thank you so much for getting to

this point, and for spending time reading and/or commenting. It means way more than you know.

So: thank you for gifting me some of your time ❤

Comments and kudos make my day, so I would LOVE to hear from you. Especially because we're at the end, so don't be shy - and yes, emojis and keyboard smashes count 😏
See you (hopefully!) in other fics, stay hydrated ❤

End Notes

Beautiful art here, here, here, here and here and here.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!